



The Pipers of the Market Place

Richard Dehan

*The Pipers of the
Market Place*

BY

Richard Dehan

*Author of "The Just Steward," "The Dop Doctor,"
"Between Two Thieves," etc.*

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Book the First:

ABOUT STEPHEN AND HIS MASTERPIECE, AND HOW
THE SHADOW FELL

Book the First: ABOUT STEPHEN AND HIS
MASTERPIECE, AND HOW THE SHADOW
FELL

I

WHEN the son of Malvina Braby first became aware of the small individual who slept and waked, was washed and dressed, ate and drank and played about the floor, and was kissed or spanked according to his deserts,—as Me and I, and Stevey,—he asked his mother (addressed by grown-up folks indifferently as ‘Malvina’ or ‘Missus’ or ‘Mrs. Braby,’) the invariable question as to whence he, small Stephen, originally came from? and received the immemorial reply with reference to the Parsley-Bed.

Upon which, a board having been placed across the threshold of the two-roomed cottage by the Tolley Farm wheatacres, to limit the explorations of a child who had recently found his feet, Stephen scaled this obstacle for the purpose of visiting the source of his origin, and, to his infinite relief—found no little brother there.

It would have had to have been a boy, he knew, to despoil him of his kingdom, for Malvina, though she inveighed against the shortcomings of mankind, held her tenderer sex in little estimation.

“Maids be muckheaps,” she would say, in her broad West Midland dialect, tintured as it came off Stephen’s tongue with less racy Hertfordshire. “Pretty or plain, ’tis all the same—they be muckheaps every one on ’em! But, whether sturdy or rickety, squinny-eyed or well-favoured, a boy be a boy. Yo’ know where yo’ be when yo’ bring one into th’ world!”

Honesty in Malvina’s nature flourished as did the herb

with the purple flowers in the coppice at the bottom of the garden. A promise made was held by her as sacred as a vow; a promise broken was a sin that might hardly be forgiven. She feared God, honoured the Queen, and never went to Church on Sundays, holding that the women went there to look at one another's bonnets, and the men to look at the women, unless they went to sleep. That she owned no Sunday bonnet might have had something to do with her abstinence. She wore sunbonnets of print as a general rule or a wide-eaved covering of straw.

The sunbonnet, or the wide-eaved bonnet of rough straw, she wore perched on the summit of the lofty head from which flowed down a wonderful sheaf of curls. The pale red-brown colour of Canada wheat, each lock retained its spirals without the adventitious aid of papers or of rags. She wound them round two wetted fingers when she combed out her tresses,—withdrew the fingers—and thus added another curl to the sheaf. There were eleven curls on one side of her head and thirteen upon the other, and Stephen drove her with these for reins when he attained the age to romp.

Young Stephen thought himself lucky to have been found by Malvina in the parsley-bed. His admiration for his mother was boundless from his birth. For one thing, she was three times as big as any other boy's mother; and a good deal bigger and stronger than the fathers of most boys.

You could climb her like a tree, and view the landscape from the top of her; and ride upon her shoulder, or swing from her powerful hand. When she was playfully disposed, she could throw you in the air and catch you; or bend the poker and straighten it again; or break stout clothes-line into bits as easily as threads.

The necessity of earning her living and her boy's, and paying Grower Grundall's rent for their leaky thatch-roofed cottage (one living-room and an attic in a little garden-enclosure on the edge of the sixty-acre wheatfield, divided by a hedge and the width of the road from the Tolley Brook beyond), obliged young Stephen's mother to be very often absent, with the front-door locked, and the rusty key

tucked away in a hole behind the rosebush that grew by the doorstep, and climbed as high as the roof.

Malvina would be picking fruit in somebody's garden or orchard, or gleaning in the cornfields if it were harvest-time. Or gathering twitch in the new-ploughed lands if it happened to be late autumn; or doing a day's scouring at Tolley Hall Farm, or Tolley Hall, or the Rectory, or one of the gentry-houses at the upper end of the Green.

But when she came home there were sunshine and love and laughter for Stevey. An apple or a cake in her pocket, a kiss on her mouth, which was deeply cut and had a humorous quirk at either corner, and a tale of the day's happenings on the tip of her tongue. Told with such richly tickling comments, such by-play and droll imitations of the voices of various persons, that Stephen would wallow in ecstasies on the floor. . . .

"What is your mother?" he was once asked by an inquisitive black-clad stranger, Sunday School Teacher, or possibly the Rector's temporary Curate, or the Doctor's Locatiner—the Doctor being on holiday at that vague place, the Seaside. . . .

"My mother she's a Masterpiece. That's what she be!" said Stevey, the term being locally employed to convey a matchless excellence in man, woman, child or cow, draught-horse or bacon-pig. It was his crushing, invariable retort to a jeering song sung at him by certain of the coarser and more turbulent among the village school-children, when in the play-hour little Steve,—who had slipped between the meshes of the net of Elementary Education as it was possible to slip in those days,—would be seen scrabbling his naked toes in the dust, and gloating through the playground railings over the progress of some game of tag or marbles, conkers or peg-in-the-ring.

This was the song, chanted to the immemorial No-tune, by the rural youth of Tollymead for Steve's discomfiture:

"Your Mother be a Gipsy
(Tramping Tinker Gipsy!)
Your Mother be a Gipsy,
An' your Da ha' runned Away!"

"He haven't not runned away,—not my Da haven't!" Stephen would declare on a repetition of the charge.

"Ah—yah! That's cos' you ain't got no Da at all!"

"Yes, I 'ave got a Da, so there!"

"Tell if you've ever seed him!"

"No, I ain't not never seen him."

"That's cos' you haven't got 'im! Ain't your Mother a Tinker Gipsy?"

"My mother she's a Masterpiece," Stephen would assert.

And he would enforce the assertion by throwing stones with a subtle twist his Masterpiece had taught him, which missiles, invariably reaching their mark, scattered his tormentors, and discouraged the idea of pursuit.

It was long before he learned to connect the absence of a father with the tiny pipkin of earthenware containing a deposit of melted grease and a wick of twisted rag, that burned from dark till the blink of day on the sill of the front window, half a dozen inches below the part-raised blind. Without it, some one returning home might fumble for the gate in the paling, might stub a toe on the bricks of the path, or trip over the broken step that led to the door. Such things are used in convents, for the love of Holy Poverty, but Malvina knew nothing of convents, and her poverty was a proud, stern thing.

Fisher-folk in Brittany use such lamps, but she had never heard of them. The little pipkin, therefore, was an expression of Malvina's self. The nightly setting of it in the window may have become mechanical, but I prefer to regard it as a resolute act of faith.

Once, being in an unusually sensitive mood, Stephen complained to his mother of this rankling deficiency in the article of a Da. Malvina, early home from work, was stooping over the fire, stirring the stew for dinner—she could make the most remarkable stews, with a swede and a scrap of bacon or salt pork, a handful of mushrooms, half a dozen 'taters and a couple of fowls' heads, a bit of scrag-end from the butcher's, or a stray young rabbit or leveret wired in their garden-patch.

She had been stooping over the pot, stirring the stew upon the fire. . . . Now she drew herself to her great height and said in her deep, full tones:

“Yo’, Steve, ha’ I ever welted yo’?”

“Not to say welted,” Steve returned, after a moment’s cogitation. “A clip now and again, when I done wrong, you might ha’ fetched me.”

“Well now, look see. I’ll welt yo’ proper and to-rights if yo’ talks about yo’r Father. Never yo’ mind no becalling o’ me. I be big enough an’ strong enough to take my own part, I reckons. Do yo’ hear?”

“Ay.”

“Then don’t yo’ forget. Here’s a bit more to remember——” As she stood with the firelight on her face, the yellow of her streaming curls was transmuted into shadowy amber; and the topmost curves of her full chin, and the long deep channel of her upper lip, and the deep-cut corners of her mouth, and the thick upper lids of her great grey eyes, and her high broad forehead above the brows, were all blocked out in shade. The bridge of her nose had a shadow like a butterfly perched just behind the tip, and the shadows of the great brass rings in her ears danced on her neck as she moved her head, and the dimple on her left cheek hardly showed, proving that Malvina was troubled, Stephen wondered why. “I be no Gipsy nor Tinker neither,” she went on in her mellow tones, “though I ha’ lived wi’ th’ Tinkers ’tis true; and knowed many Gipsies, and worse folks be than they there Romanies as I reckons; for they are true to their own. Yo’ ha’ heard o’ the Coal and Iron Country up North; to Staffordshire?” Steve nodded, and she went on, “Well, I wer’ bred and born there—over to Leckley-way.”

She stretched to stir the bubbling pot and went on speaking:

“My Father he smithied Nails of all sorts, and so did my poor Mother; and as soon as I wer’ able for to sort and gross Nails, I sorted and I grossed ’em; and when my Father were over wi’ Hammering Nails,—him being the biggest and strongest man as ever I set eyes on, an’ always in Liquor, he Hammered my mother and me. An’ after

she died—for he Hammered her once too often I reckons!—I runned away to a woman which had been kind to me. She an' her husband bein' travellin' hawkers, as wer' comin' down-along from th' Potteries; wi' a van-load o' chaney an' stone-ware an' earthenpots an' pans."

"Same as the swag-barrer men and women what comes here, Fair time?"

"Somethin' the same, but more respectabler. That lady and gentleman on the chimley-piece as I sets such store by"—Malvina nodded gravely at a china mug, bearing the gilt legend 'A Present For A Good Girl' together with a bride and bridegroom in multi-coloured garments, walking arm-in-arm up a brilliantly green pathway in the direction of a vermilion Church—"were give me by the woman—the first present I ever had, I reckon. An' the plate wi' the pink rose on it as yo' be so mortal fond of. She give me that 'un too."

Stephen's eyes went to the corner cupboard, behind the glass of which were treasures. Namely, a pair of crockery spaniels with red and yellow collars, some glittering lustre 'vawses,' a pair of old blue Delft candlesticks, and two plates of white stone-ware, one displaying in vivid colours a half-length portrait of the Duke of Wellington, while the other bore the presentment of a fully blown pink rose. Now to Stephen, that worshipper of flowers, the rose was the darling. There were many gardens in and about the neighbourhood of Tolleymead, both of the private and the market-supplying sort. And Covent Garden Market was the bourne of Stephen's wishes, the point towards which his being turned as the needle to the Pole.

When he dreamed of Covent Garden—which he did awake and sleeping!—he heard a thin sweet piping, and voices calling him. The voices were the voices of innumerable millions of flowers, and the music was their music, blown from the trumpets of their petals, fiddled by their slender anthers on their bases' tiny strings.

Stephen's ambition (unless when it veered towards salt water and a life of adventure) was to be a Market-gardener, and grow flowers the whole year round. Hothouse forced or greenhouse reared, or outdoor-grown in summer, in

beds as big as croquet-lawns, in gardens bigger than fields. He would grow rich by selling flowers, though seeing your bright-faced children dispersed in strangers' clutches must hurt, it seemed to him. But when you used the money to buy more land for market-gardening, and grow even grander and lovelier flowers—— Oh, only wait a bit! . . .

Steve had lapsed into dreaming of the Market while his mother still talked of Mrs. Casgey:

"She schooled me to read and spell a bit out o' th' Good Book there on the shelf." (A dumpy copy of the Bible kept with Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* on a green wool mat, covered from the dust with a thread-lace handkerchief.) "Th' same as I learned yo' yo'r letters in—and she taught me th' prayers I's taught yo'."

"'Our Father' an' th' other one, 'bout Matthew, Mark, Luke an' John?" inquired Stephen, coming back to the world of every day.

"Ay—an' when I'd bin with 'em four years—I were ten year old when I joined 'em,—Mr. Casgey—the kind woman's husband,—he teached me to use my Hands. He were a smart-like, active man, dressing uncommon slap-up, an' proper clever wi' his mauleys—an' when there was Purses put up for Fights at Fairs, and Wakes, and such-like, he'd pitch his hat into the Ring, an' step in after, an' more often than not—he'd carry off the Purse! So—me being wonderful big and strong for fourteen, an' gettin' bigger; and beginnin' to have trouble wi' men-folk about my Looks an' such; I found what Mr. Casgey called Scientific Hammering useful." She reached out a massive arm and stirred the stew again, adding: "Then, an' many a time since. Eh, the men!"

Upon this, a characteristic ejaculation of Malvina's in moments of wonder or perplexity at the bewildering nature of the vagaries displayed by the dominant male, she shut her lips resolutely, and went on stirring. The firelight seemed to reflect itself in eyes that did not see it. The rafters and walls had stopped echoing when she had left off speaking, and there was so long a period of unbroken silence that Steve wriggled in agony upon his three-legged wooden stool.

“Bain’t there no more on it?” he asked, with a gloomy sense of injury; his mother seemed to have drifted so very far away. . . .

“She took ill,” said his mother, “one sickly autumn—meaning Mrs. Casgey as had bin so true to me. We was at Tot’nam High Cross, an’ for days an’ days I nursed her, having a love of ’tending to sick folks at all times. But she got no better, an’ they carried her off to Tot’nam Infirmary, the Doctor as we’d called to her saying ’twas a Fever Case. And there she died—me never being let in to see her, nor do nothing whatsoever for her—an’ there she was buried, in the poor part of Tot’nam High Cross Churchyard. And me being rising seventeen—when we got back from th’ Funeral—her husband offers to Marry me an’ take me on th’ road. ‘I’ll do the Square Thing by yo’, Malvina,’ he says to me, ‘and expect yo’ to be properly Grateful. There’s no use cryin’ over Spilt Milk. She’s gone, as were a good ’un,’ he says, ‘an’ won’t come back agen. So give us a kiss, or a couple of ’em to start with,—an’ as soon as may be managed we’ll go afore a Croaker—being Flash patter for a Parson—an’ be regularly married wi’ th’ old gal’s ring!’ Eh, the men! . . .”

Whenever she had stirred the pot her shadow had mimicked the action with an arm as long as a clothes-prop on the whitewashed wall behind. Now as she lifted a clenched hand, the shadow lifted another, that brandished on the ceiling in a very menacing way.

“He’d had a sup too much o’ drink, I’ll try an’ believe it on him, as had bin in his way a good friend to me and a good husband to her. Or—maybe he wer’ like other men; an’ she covered up th’ worst on him, an’ hid a sore heart wi’ a smiling face, as women learn to do! But she’d bin like a true mother to me,—an’ that talk of our getting Married—an’ her not a day laid in the ground, an’ the sight o’ the poor soul’s ring. . . . Someways it went to my head like drink—not as I’d ever took none!—an’ I up wi’ my mauleys as he’d taught me how—an’ I reckon I Hammered him!”

At this point Stephen snickered joyously, for the hoist-

ing of Mr. Casgey by his own petard had exquisite relish for him:

“You give him a proper Bloody Nose, an’ a couple in the Bread-Basket?”

“I bloodied his Nose, for certain sure, an’ give him two Mourning Peepers. An’ I may ha’ rattled his ribs a bit—but No hitting below the belt. ’Tisn’t anyways sporting nor workmanlike.”

“O! Then wot happened?”

“I took my bundle an’ went away, an’ that’s how I come to join th’ Tinkers. Irish they was, an’ not overly clean, an’ the men drank hard, though the women was God-fearing an’ respectable. And I’d made up my mind to quit company the day before the day I saw yo’r Father at Marnet Fair.”

“Tell about him!”

“No more than this, as fits yo’ to remember, my promise always holding good to Hammer yo’ if yo’ talk.”

Her broad bosom heaved with the deep breath she drew, under its rough brown wincey covering; the dancing fire-light showed a pulse that throbbled in the hollow at the base of her throat, as she turned great eyes upon her son; and said to him, sternly now:

“Get yo’ off’n that ther’ stool, and hark to me yo’r mother. Yo’r Father he were treated bad by his own flesh and blood. Slighted from his birth, he were, for little or no reason, an’ money and land that by rights wer’ his, Willed away to folks no Kin. Then there were a quarrel, an’ yo’r Father he went away to the London Courts of Chancery, to get the Man on th’ Woolsack to gi’ some o’ th’ money to him. He’d promised me—yo’r Father had—as niver would he touch it, but he let the thought on it work on him, an’ were ’tangled and tolled away. Thirteen year ago. He come back to me at Christmas-tide, and once after that he come again—since when never no more ha’ I set eyes on him! Two chil’ren they’d died; Wilfrid my first”—(it gave Steve a startling shock to hear that he had had a brother)—“an’ another boy as breathed but twicet after he were born, poor thing! I reckon as I had

Fretted a bit that time, wi' one thing an' another. . . . Since when I ha' Done wi' Fretting, even when the Savings in the Bank went to keep yo'r Father in London; and this Cottage and the bit o' land that Mrs. Parmint left him, being her Nurseling as she said—and dearer to her than any—falled into other hands, Money being raised on 'em,—since when I ha' been paying Rent to the Grower, Lawyer Grundall's Son. Do yo' hear me plain, yo' Steve?"

"I hears you, mother."

"Now yo' knows pretty nigh as much as me. Mind and remember, for after this once speaking, I'll speak of it no more! An' yo'll remember this, yo' will,—yo'r Father's no ways blameable. Th' money he tried to git hold o' wer' his by right an' law. An' though he broke his word to me, I as be his wife ha' forgi'en him, an' none can call him to account for wrong he did to me. An' I have heard, from folks that knows,—as there are hundreds at they Courts of Chancery up to London—women and men, young and old, with loving friends a-waiting,—and them as are nearer even than friends—that have been Drawn in like to yo'r Father was—and can no more get free again than flies in a Spider's web! And he's got that nature in his blood as gold or goods he have a right to, he'd rather see 'em flung away than make an enemy rich. If he must lose the ship—he'll choose to burn the ship to th' water, afore he'll see her pass away into a stranger's hands! We'll talk o' this no more now! As for they youngsters up vil-lage, what they should have is a Hammering. Pick out the biggest of 'em next time, and go in, an' Hammer him sound. I'll learn yo' how. Stand now, and put up yo'r dooks—double yo'r thumbs well over. Keep yo'r left shoulder back,—hit out as hard as you like—yo'll never get nigh o' me!"

So Steve got off his three-legged stool, and there and then received the first of many subsequent lessons in the noble science of Fisticuffs—and by and by fell upon the biggest of his tormentors, and duly Hammered him. Trouble with the children of Tolleymead being much lessened by this process (though occasional comments from

their parents and friends with reference to the fashion of Stephen's hair and clothes could not be checked in this fashion), the eleventh autumn of the boy's life was the happiest he had ever known. Who had known nothing but happiness, until across the threshold of the cottage fell the wavering unsteady shadow of the man whom Stephen named 'The Enemy.'

2

The Shadow fell in the last days of November, 1870, a month of rain-laden south-west gales. In London (not so far away) the Michaelmas Law Term had been born and had expired,¹ to the sobbing of the gusty wind and the grey skies' sooty weeping, and the hard-won silver stored away by Malvina in the box in the bed-frame had gone to pay the Michaelmas rent.

Here on the edge of the Middlesex clay the harvest had been cut and carried in blinks of watery sunshine, interspersed with downpours that tinged the stubbles prematurely with unwholesome green. Plough-horses bogged in the furrow; fired haystacks, belching thick black smoke, called out the Parish engines; and sprouted ricks in farmers' yards aped verdant porcupines.

Near the end of a drizzly day, blurry with fog that tangled in trees, copses, and hedgerows, and lay in grey blankets on the fields, and clung to the beards and clothes of men, and covered the surfaces of chairs, tables, settles and window-panes with an unpleasant, clammy kind of bloom, young Stevey was up village in the tap of 'The Pure Drop' tavern, a resort which held a charm for him beyond the 'Spotted Dog.'

'The Spotted Dog' was near the School on the road running west by the Rectory grounds, and eastward past the Tally-Ho Coach-office, to join the Great North Road. It called itself an Inn, and had a Coffee-Room, and a Billiard-Room, and a Bottle and Jug Department, and a Bar instead of a tap. But 'The Pure Drop' stood on the

¹ Until the Amendment Act of 1830 passed in 1873, the Michaelmas Law Term began November 2nd, and ended November 25th.

northern edge of the Green (on the east side of which runs the Tolley Brook), looking over Hendon, Finchley and Highgate—and the wooded scarps of Hampstead, to a bluish-dun haze in the south and east, that meant the innumerable chimneys of the City of young Stevey's dreams—Whittington's London Town.

The tap of 'The Pure Drop' had once been the hall of a Grange or Manor-house, in the days when ruffed Tudor sovereigns (with an eye to wealthy abbeys and convents with sacristy cupboards rich in jewelled copes and chalices) made stately Progresses through happy Hertfordshire. It had a vast stone-hooded hearth, where a timorous little fire of sticks shuddered between huge dog-irons, and its stone-flagged floor ran steeply downhill opposite the counter-end. Not a polished mahogany counter with a barmaid behind it, and a row of brass-mounted beer-pulls such as the 'Spotted Dog' could show; but a kind of dusty carved wooden cave that had once been a Buttery-Hatch, lighted by a hanging oil-lamp, cousin to the one that dimly burned behind the fanlight over the door. Pewter measures, and crockery jugs and mugs were ranged on shelves in this cavern, or hung from nails driven into the wormy panelling. And in the dusk at the back of the cave lurked a row of—not barrels of porter, ale and beer, as grown folks foolishly imagined, mounted on clumsy timber baulks—but awful formless monsters, pretending to be asleep, while waiting to pounce on unwary boys. . . .

For sometimes this dusky, dampish place—with its sanded floor all slanting, and worn by the tread of centuries into hollows here and there—was for Stephen a desert island inhabited by these horrors. At other times it was the Cave of a band of hardy Sea Rovers, who owned Stephen as their Captain and knew no law but his.

His private library (Malvina had taught him to spell out of her big-print Bible—the only book she had ever read, with the exception of *The Pilgrim's Progress*)—his private library, kept in a hole where three bricks had come out of the chimney-side of the cottage by the wheatacres, comprised a tattered volume of Aitken's *Arctic Voyages*, a *Robinson Crusoe*, the First Abridg'd, with the smudgy

little black woodcuts, and a *Garden Lovers' Manual and Horticultural Almanac*, with gaudy-coloured flower-plates, for the year 1811. Lastly a battered copy, printed at New Orleans in 1800, of the *Lives, Exploits, Robberies and Cruelties of Celebrated Buccaneers and Sea Rovers, With Certain Adventures of Freebooters, Brigands, and Slave-Hunters by Land*.

The books Stephen somehow knew had belonged to his father. An inscription in laborious roundhand at the top of the title-page of *Robinson Crusoe* said it was:

'A Preasn to My Mr Wilfrid on His 8t
Berthday. From his Afexn Nurse

'Susan Parmint.

'4 Sepr 1841.'

The *Lives, Exploits and Cruelties* had the autograph 'Geoffrey Braby,' in faded writing, neat and small, over the date '1810.' Without quite knowing how he knew, Stephen understood Geoffrey Braby to have been his father's father; dead and buried years before he, Stephen, had been born.

The *Garden Lovers' Manual* and the *Lives, Exploits and Cruelties* were more dog's-eared and thumb-marked than *Crusoe* and the other book. There were times when Stephen wavered between the career of a Market Gardener and the life of a Sea Rover, as described in the *Exploits and Cruelties*, which had a salty smell. The aroma of old cigar-smoke still exhaled from its yellow pages, their corners dog's-eared here and there to mark favourite chapters, particularly those descriptive of the plundering of treasure-ships at sea.

The Garden Lovers' Manual had belonged to 'Amelia Braby,' who had written inside the cover in a tremulous Italian hand: 'To Susan Parmint, my Dear Friend.' 'Easter 1832' was added a little lower down, in those wavering, delicate characters. The gift to Susan had been made, Stephen realised many years later, before his father Wilfrid had seen the light of an unfriendly world. And Susan, who had nursed Stephen's grandmother, had reared

her weakly baby. How much better it might have been for him, if honest Susan had failed!

But Susan had faithfully performed her task, and had left her bit of freehold, a living-room and a garret under the thatch, to Stephen's father when she died. Stephen visualized her as a tallish, spare, active old woman of seventy, with bright black eyes looking from the eaves of a quilted green cotton sunbonnet, a brown print gown speckled with white, turned up over a drugget petticoat and tucked through the placket, a blue-checked apron on week-days, and a black silk one for Sundays, worn in conjunction with a black net cap, with bristling purple bows. And this vision of Mrs. Susan Parmint was inseparable from the horrifying idea that instead of being properly buried in Tolleymead Churchyard, Mrs. Parmint, in her habit as she had lived, had been shut up inside the clock, an ancient timepiece of grandfather type that stood in a corner of the living-room, displaying in the left top corner of its square brass face a ship in full sail over extremely green waves, and a half-moon on the right. These mystic symbols being supposed, when certain machinery behind should once be set a-going, to indicate the times of the tides, and the planet's wax and wane.

The company assembled in the tap of 'The Pure Drop' on this dripping Monday evening comprised no members of the fairer sex, the washing keeping these at home. Rumbold, the wheelwright, a long-limbed man, robust and hale and powerful still, though some years over seventy, and with a face that might have been hewn from seasoned mahogany, sat with two other veterans on the high-backed oak settle near the hearthplace, wearing his usual working clothes, tight-gaitered pantaloons, single-breasted vest of tough corduroy, and a high-collared brass-buttoned body-coat of coarse blue cloth. A decent cravat of black silk being wound about his collarless throat, and tied in a strangle-knot, its long ends straggling loosely over the clean white Sunday shirt.

Mr. Wix, the head-gardener from Tolley Hall, in virtue of his social status, occupied a Windsor elbow-chair facing

the meagre little fire that languished in the great fireplace. Whichello, the Rector's clerk, gardener and coachman combined, sat on a rush-bottomed chair in the corner opposite the settle, while Haybitt, the by-way-of-butcher, Dotsoe, a crippled cobbler, Thickbroom, the proprietor of the chandler's shop, and a scattering of workmen and field-labourers, sat on the benches by the walls, or stood about with widespread legs, chatting in thick, slow voices, or leaned against the zinc-covered board that served as the tap counter, occasionally contributing a nod or grunt to the fund of village talk.

While straying amongst the wet legs of 'The Pure Drop's' patrons,—as little noticed by them as some ownerless pup—you are to see a bright-eyed urchin of something over eleven, with yellow curls dangling over a clean white 'hunkumed' smock.

Breeches and leggings underneath the smock ('hunkumed' being local for 'honeycombed') might have been taken for granted, or knickers and yarn half-stockings, ending in clump-soled boots. But Stephen's lanky, naked legs projected from the coy shelter of a frock of coarse red flannel, its barrel-body fastened behind by flat white discs of bone.

As regards Stephen's feet, which were huge for his size, they went naked, winter and summer. Upon the matrons of Tolleymead, the effect of the curls, petticoats and legs combined, was somewhat neutralized by familiarity, the subject having developed inch by inch, under their scandalized eyes. But they still said he were heathenish, and it gave you a fair turn to look at him,—whenever they had time to look.

Upon strangers visiting Tolleymead, the first casual sight of Stephen—pointed out as a local landmark—took effect in various ways. Males whistled shrilly before becoming personal. Females, if young, giggled, and if elderly, screwed up their lips, or gasped out: 'Gracious!' Generally, when these recovered breath, they said that some one ought to speak to that boy's mother. Pursuing this idea, and growing warm—in proportion to the tepidity of folks who knew the aforesaid mother—they asserted a determination to speak to her themselves. Upon which, or at the

earliest chance, Malvina was pointed out to them. They could see her coming from a long way off, and the bigger she loomed upon the view, the less acute became their desire to pursue the unequal combat. The boy belonged to her after all, they admitted at this juncture, and hers was the right to dress him up like a Guy Fawkes if she chose.

'The Pure Drop' stood on the northern corner of Tolleymead Goose Green, and thus whenever solitary play began to pall on Stephen, he would watch for the moment when the taproom door swung inwards at the entrance of a customer, to snatch on the skyline south and east, between clumps of woods long-vanished now, and brooding banks of fog or haze (or as to-night, dark thunderous clouds, with the last reflections from the sunset-fires that had all faded from the west smouldering out behind them), a glimpse of the city of his dreams. . . .

London.—Where Queen Victoria lived, and the Prince of Wales and the Princess. . . . His Worship the Lord Mayor, Sir Edwin as made the Lions, Mr. Calcraft, what Hanged you, if you deserved it, Mr. Spurgeon who Preached the Sermons, Cockle as made the Pills, and Boz as made 'Pickwick,' and what that meant Stephen wasn't overly certain. Only his name was jolly rum—and that when word came he was dead, some months back in the Summer, Mr. Wix, the head-gardener from Tolley Hall, had looked uncommon solemn, and said such a death was nothing less than a National Calamity.

London.—Where there was live Lions and Tigers in a Sewerlogical Gardens. Shops and theaytres beautiful to behold. Also Hashley's Circus, not to speak of the Markets. Smithfield where the Cattle went to be killed,—Stratford and Spitalfields, The Borough, and Covent Garden Market, best, biggest and beautifullest of all.

Stephen left Covent Garden last, because of the thrill it brought him. The thin sweet music of the flowers began to pipe and trill. There was nothing at all in Sea Roving when those tiny voices called to him: "Grow up and be a Gardener, Stephen Braby! Love us better than others love, and we will give you more!"

At such times nothing was more sure than that Steve would belong to the flowers, though in the vicinity of Mr. Wix, Market Gardeners paled. Wix dressed the part of a Country House Head-gardener very attractively, in a tall shaggy hat with a yellow silk handkerchief stowed away inside it, a light checked suit, made very tight, Wellington boots being worn over the pants in wet weather,—and carried a silver watch so large that consulting it required art.

To be such a man, and wear such a hat, such a suit of checks and such Wellingtons, and stroll about the gardens on a pleasant autumn day, digging out Stocks for Standards with a bright steel spade, or taking Cuttings with a specially sharp penknife; or mixing Soils for seedlings on a board in the Potting Shed—that would be a life! Steve wondered if the flowers piped for the Tolley Hall head-gardener? And a long way down inside him he felt sure that they did not.

The heavy latch clashed up and down, and the door swung open or shut to behind clients coming and going. . . . London was now a huge formless blur on the wet horizon, with banks of lowering blue-black cloud piled tier on tier above her, and streaks of greenish livid light oozing and creeping through. Thunder muttered at intervals faintly in the distance, though Stephen had heard that muttering when the nights were dry and fine. There it came again now,—that curious throb—throb—throbbing . . .

The door clashed-to in Stephen's face and shut out London. An evil whiff assailed his nose, a smell of Dirt and Poverty—mingled with a fiery spirituous reek. And somebody stumbled against him, heavily trod on his naked toes and swore at him savagely; and thrust him aside roughly, so that he nearly fell.

A miserable, squalid figure in a thin, dilapidated overcoat, the wraith of a muffler wound about its neck, and on a shaggy unkempt head an old felt hat so greasy that it shed off the rain in streams. A coughing Tramp, muddy to the eyes, with broken boots oozing water and mud through divers gaping cracks in them. With a heavy stick

in his bony yellow hand, and the wreck of a gaudy carpet-bag slung about his stooping shoulders by a frayed piece of cord.

Behind his evil-smelling back as he thrust forward to the tap-counter, Stephen stuck out his tongue and cocked a snook, because of his aching toes; and then forgot those members and the man who had trodden on them, hearing Mr. Wix the gardener from the Hall explaining to Wheelwright Rumbold that the sound that had puzzled Stephen so all through the summer and autumn, wasn't thunder as people thought,—but Cannon being Shot Off, over across the Channel, where Bloody War was a-going on, between the Germans and the French.

3

As the head-gardener from Tolley Hall made this amazing statement—taking a stout pale cigar with a gilded waist-band round it (called a 'Pickwick' and choice at three-pence) from a special box kept on a shelf,—men standing in the now crowded place turned to stare at the speaker. And the simultaneous shifting of their feet upon the tap-room flagstones sounded like the backwash of a wave that has flopped into the mouth of a cavern, carrying with it back to the sea shingle and sand and weed.

Stephen had never seen the sea (without which element there could be no splendid things like Sea Rovers), but he had read and dreamed of it; and this swirling, grating, scraping sound sent thrills from his scalp down his spine. He held his breath, waiting for it to happen again, half loathing, half desirous. But nothing came but the husky voice of the landlord, Popplewell.

“Marvels in Natur’ we know there are, and are grateful to eddicated gen’l’men—such as yourself, Mr. Wix, sir—for a tip now and agen. But when it come to hearing cannon fired in Foreign Parts, here to say in the Bosom of England, I ventur’ to hint, Mr. Wix, sir, as you’re having your little joke?”

“Not—a—bit of it!” said Mr. Wix, a dapper, black-eyed, grizzled little man, and a red-hot Democrat. He

spoke with breaks between the words imposed by sucks at the pale cigar, which drew but badly. Now he opened a horn-handled pocket-knife, and with the smallest, sharpest blade,—the one he used when Budding—he jabbed the cigar in a vital part, viciously again and again: “Cannon I said” (jab) “and Cannon I meant,” (jab) “big, middle-sized and” (jab) “little; being shot off by men against their feller-men,” (jab-jab) “Morning, noon and night! And while rivers of blood are running and—” (jab) “heads and arms and legs are flying—Here we sit, or stand at our liking—this Britain being a Free Country—a-tasting all the Blessings of Peace under a Moan-archical Constitootion and a Liberal Government. Until the Nobs at Whitehall and the Lords and Commons at Westminster take it into their Addled Heads——”

“’Ear! ’ear!” called out one of several men present who worked in the gardens at the Hall.

“You draw it mild, old Cocky-Wax!” growled Bendall the glazier, a master-man who employed Labour and could dispute with Mr. Wix on an equality, there being what was termed ‘a deal of glass’ in the grounds of the neighbourhood.

“—Take it into their Addled Heads,” reiterated Mr. Wix obstinately, sticking the cigar in the corner of his mouth and striking a match on his leg, “to give Us a Taste of War. What of that there Two Million Vote to increase the Army in August?”

“Protectionary Measures,” growled the glazier, “Protectionary Measures and no More.”

Mr. Wix sucked savagely at his cigar, which resolutely declined to kindle,—and before he could break out again, a deep bass voice spoke:

“Being a plain, rough-cut man, wi’, no pretence to Schooling,” said the deep voice,—which was strong enough to fill the tap of ‘The Pure Drop,’ though its owner had weathered the rains and snows of more than seventy years,—“and granting as Fighting is going on ’twixt French Frogs and German Sausages—not as I see much word of it in the Prints as come my way!—I ask why the evening’s ’armony should suffer on accounts of it?—seeing as how—

if War can be caught—the same as Mumps or Measles—and not disputing as it can,—we haven't caught it yet!"

"'Ear—'ear! Angcore!" cried a chorus of approving voices, and there was even some clapping of horny working hands. Infuriating Mr. Wix (whose temper had been soured by the perpetual demands of cooks for late peas and early asparagus)—to the extent of producing from the crown of his tall hat, where it companied with the yellow silk handkerchief, a tightly folded copy of the *Herts Radical Post*. From which, taking his stand under the lamp that swung above the counter, he proceeded to read from the column headed 'News From The Seat of Hostilities' how Eleven French Towns, 3653 Guns, 155 Mitrailleuses, 500,000 Chassepots, Nine Eagles and Standards, and Four Millions in Money had been taken by the Germans up to date. How a German Corps—pronounced by Mr. Wix as spelt—was then marching on Amiens and Rouen, and Five more surrounding Paris, with batteries ready to smash that city into heaps of brick and stone.

"Suppose it this here Country's case, you seven-and-seventy Sleepers!" cried Mr. Wix, lowering the newspaper to glare about the tap. "Write Harwich and Dover down here 'stead of Amens and Rowing,—and London instead of Paris—and where would you be then?"

"They putts a mortal lot o' lies in they theer Daily Papers," Thickbroom, the chandler, observed to Haybitt, the by-way-of-butcher, who only killed when the ultimate fragment of the last beast slain had found a buyer. "A mortal lot o' lies they prints, to stuff the geese that buys 'em. As for they Five Hundred Thousand Chased Pots, they might be Brass or even Lead, or Tin, for all we knows of 'em. And when it comes to Corpses marching on the City of Paris—I don't believe a word on it!—and so I tells you plain."

"'Ens may run round wi'out their 'eads," the by-way-of-butcher responded, in a whisper, for his services were occasionally required on the Tolley Hall Home Farm. "And some beastes takes a sight more killin' than others—me having been kicked across my own yard by a cow I'd

ha' sworn were Beef. But Marching Corpses is a thing I never thought to hear of."

"Nor never will!" said the deep bass of Rumbold the wheelwright, who enjoyed a small monopoly in the undertaking line. "All a Corpse wants, poor helpless thing! is to be fit wi' a decent coffin, an' screwed down conformable before 'tis laid away."

"Have you never heard of dead folks turning in their coffins?"

The question came from the corner of a bench against the wall of the taproom, on the downhill side, unillumined by the feeble rays of the lamp. A stranger's voice, not pleasant, being hollow, harsh and jarring; not a common voice, either, and possibly the worse for that.

"Why Ay, I reckon, master, whoever you be as asks it," returned the wheelwright, glancing over his shoulder towards the wall. "But I never put no faith in it."

"And you, Mister! Over there, with the newspaper!"

This query being plainly intended to be answered by the Hall gardener, Mr. Wix with some reluctance replied in the affirmative.

"'Yes' d'ye say?" went on the voice, broken by a hacking cough at intervals. "Well, there's a paragraph or so in the Local Intelligence Column of the damned rag you've got there, will give you a reason why some coffins in this Churchyard of Tolleymead should heave and quake,—if they don't split and give up their dead to-night!"

"And why should the graves give up their dead?" asked the Rector's clerk and handy-man, who, absorbed in his nightly game of cribbage with the little hump-backed cripple (who always beat him unmercifully), had not spoken or looked up before:—"them having been properly interred with the Church of England Service, Responses being delivered, and all in a Orthodox way?"

"Oh, stow your jaw!" snarled the savage voice with a gnashing kind of impatience, as its owner, who had been lying huddled on the bench in the shadows near the settle heaved himself up with some effort and dropped his ragged feet to the floor. As he stood up, scowling and shivering and clutching his dilapidated overcoat to drag it closer

round him, Stephen knew him for the man who had sworn at him and trodden on his toes. He plunged at the counter as he had previously done, scattering the groups of drinkers, and threw down some copper coins on it, with a sordid, swaggering air: "Another four of rum here—and a drop of boiling water. Though blast me! if I want much more of that, being soaked to the very bones. *Ha'ckrr!* Damn the cough! Look alive, Missus!"

"You're in a hurry, seemingly?" hinted the landlord, reaching down a squat black bottle and turning to look at the customer with something of a frown. "I'd ask leave to remind you, whoever you be, that while custom is always welcome, strangers as make so free as to behave uncivil on the premises, are apt to find themselves pitched out, without 'With' or 'By your leave!'"

"Give me my drink I've paid for, and stash your bragging, gaffer!" said the mouth that was like a bleeding wound under the ragged hair. "Take that water away! I'll drink it neat. And since there's talk of pitching—May the hand rot off that's lifted to turn me out this night!"

4

The sensation caused by this amiable toast induced a slight commotion, through which the voice of Mr. Wix made excited efforts to be heard.

"Lord, lord! Here is a bit o' news that's Local with a vengeance! And as has been waited here in Tolleymead for many a dragged-out year!" He continued, having at last secured the popular attention; first trumpeting loudly in the yellow silk handkerchief: "'Many of our County 'readers, particularly those resident in the neighbourhoods 'of Brabycott, Tolleymead and Wheatstone, will be interested by an item in Wednesday's *Law Gazette* with reference to the Chancery Suit in which the Plaintiff Wilfrid 'Thomasson Braby Esq. of Tolleymead, was admitted by 'the Court in 1857 to sue *in forma pauperis* the setting aside 'of a Will made in the October of the year 1855 by his 'sister and only near relative, Miss Ann Thomasson Braby

‘of Brabycott House, Brabycott, leaving to her sole Trustee
‘and executor, Mr. Gregson Grundall, of The Chestnuts,
‘Wheatstone, her entire estate and effects, personal and real;
‘including the Freehold Title to Brabycott House, the park,
‘and lands pertaining, together with a sum of Seventy
‘Thousand Pounds, invested in Home Rails and Consols.
‘On the 23rd of this November, two days previously to the
‘ending of the Michaelmas Law Term, the suit ended; its
‘procedure having extended over a period exceeding thirteen
‘years.’ ”

When Mr. Wix had begun to read, the snarling, sordid, shaggy tramp had plunged back into his darkling corner. Stephen could hear him muttering, and gulping down his rum. And the tap of ‘The Pure Drop’ was full of the sound of the wave that washed back to the wide, deep sea over stone and sand and shingle,—carrying weed and wreckwood and drowned men’s whitened bones. . . .

“What’s that?”

“Did ye ever!”

“That’s News, and wi’ a vengeance!”

These and similar exclamations were uttered by a dozen or more voices in as many different tones.

“By your good leave, neighbours and all——” Rumbold the wheelwright rose from the settle, making with the beer-mug in his great knotty hand, a sign—and not at all imperative—that quelled in some mysterious way the tumult in the tap. “Being,” the wheelwright went on, “of interest to many of the comp’ny, myself in particular as being well acquainted wi’ one of the Parties in the Suit—I would ask you to kindly read us out the rest of what’s said in the paper—if so be as there’s any more to come?”

“Certainly, Mr. Rumbold,” said the Hall gardener, graciously. “Ahem! Where was I? Just in the middle, here. ‘The decision of the Court has proved in favour of the Defendant, Mr. Gregson Grundall——’ ”

“Order here, friends!” cried the wheelwright, loudly, a tumult of excited voices having drowned the reader’s here. “Go on, Mr. Wix. You’ve just read out as Grundall had got it——”

“ ‘In favour of the Defendant, Mr. Gregson Grundall; the Plaintiff, Mr. Wilfrid Braby, being ordered to pay the entire costs of the Suit. It is stated,’ ” read the gardener, “ ‘the said costs being chargeable upon the estate in litigation,—that the entire sum of Seventy Thousand Pounds left by Miss Ann Thomasson Braby will not serve to defray them all; and that Brabycott House and its surrounding park with the remainder of the property, will be shortly sold at auction under a decree from the Court.’ ”

The voices of the listeners broke in anew with excited questions and comments. The wheelwright held up a huge brown hand signalling ‘more to come.’ And silence having at last been gained by this stimulation of local curiosity, Mr. Wix hem-hemmed to clear his throat, and mopped his forehead and went on:

“ ‘The Case which has after years of litigation reached its end with the ending of the Term, may be cited as one of many instances where the undue partiality of a parent for one child in favour of a brother or sister has led to legal actions not only in the Civil, but in the Criminal Courts.’ ”

“ ‘Ear, ’ear!’ ” said Bendall the glazier. The gardener continued:

“ ‘The Lord High Chancellor, Right Honourable Justices, Masters, Counsel, Solicitors, clerks and divers witnesses have been engaged for a number of years in thrashing out the question whether the only son of the late Geoffrey Thomasson Braby and only brother of the late Miss Ann Thomasson Braby has or has not a claim upon the family estate. The plaintiff, Mr. Wilfrid Braby, who, penniless himself, has perforce been a party to the expenditure of many thousands, may console himself upon the one hand with the assurance that a considerable number of highly respectable persons intimately connected with the legal profession, have been supported in affluence at his expense during the past thirteen years. While upon the other hand he may wring out the ghost of a smile at the reflection, that to the perseverance and tenacity of the solicitors representing him, Messrs. Tusser, Worrill and Stickey, of Furnival’s Inn, London, and the several elo-

‘quent counsel who have been retained to plead his suit, he owes it that a mere moiety of the Braby property will drop into the already well-filled pockets of Mr. Gregson Grundall, of The Chestnuts, Wheatstone, the late Miss Ann Braby’s ‘executor and legatee.’ ”

“And there it ends,” said Mr. Wix, looking over the Newspaper, “with a friendly word for Braby, and a poke in the ribs for Grundall. Who had better have made terms with Braby when he might, than let him go to Law. My opinion is, that all Grundall will get, when the Chancery crows and kites and owls have done picking the bones of the Braby property—will be no more than you could put in your eye, and see none the worser for.”

“This man is a bird of prey himself,” said a hollow voice from the corner, where the surly tramp had been coughing and muttering since last he spoke aloud. “He’s the son—or those who told me lied!—of Grundall of Tipping Marnet, the Braby solicitor and trustee, until Ann Braby died. I’ve heard he was educated for the law, and articulated to his father, and made junior partner in the business, until he got kicked out. And though he’s a gentleman farmer now, and a Grower for the London Markets, you wouldn’t scratch the farmer deep without coming to the lawyer under his skin. That’s what I heard not far from here. Is it truth, or is it slander?”

“Truth, master,” said Rumbold bluntly, “by whoever it may ha’ been told.”

“Then this man, being bred to the business of the Law, and having his father to back him,” pursued the speaker with such vehemence and heat that the sentences jostled on his tongue, “that same father being the sharpest old Blade the Law ever stropped to an edge!—has known how to dodge and twist and turn and use to his own advantage the opportunities that have come his way in these last Thirteen years. Are the hall-marks of Chancery on Brabycott, in Blight and rot and mildew? Have the Brabycott lands been farmed, or left to go to weeds and decay? Have the gardens been neglected or husbanded? Have the pastures been used for grazing, and the two home-farms kept going? Let those who can answer, say.”

“Why many here besides myself can answer they questions,” said the wheelwright. “The House is shut, and the drive overgrown, and the shrubberies in want o’ trimming, an’ th’ horses ha’ gone from the stables, an’ th’ grooms and coachmen too. But there’s no blight on Brabycott as I knows on, up to the present.”

“Then Chancery has winked, by Heaven!” retorted the other, savagely.

“Whether Chancery have winked or not, things are as I say they be at Brabycott.” Rumbold continued as two sheepish-looking men got up and left the taproom. “There went two chaps as could bear me out. They work in the gardens there.”

“Let them go to their master and tell him then,” said the tramp with intense acrimony, “that a man turned in at ‘The Pure Drop’ who said he was a scoundrel. Well, let them. It won’t be news to him.”

“Come, come!” the landlord interposed. “A little more good-temper and a good deal less becalling ’ud make ye a pleasanter neighbour to folks as likes quiet wi’ their drink. If Grower Grundall’s won the Suit—much good may it do him!”

“And so say I, Gaffer!” cried the tramp with almost rabid violence, flourishing the thick-stemmed rummer theatrically over his head. “Here’s the dregs of my drink to all the good I hope it may do the fellow! Gregson Grundall of Brabycott House, Gentleman, and Justice of the Peace!”

“Come, come!” said the landlord angrily, hurrying round the counter as the rummer, dashed to the stone-flagged floor, shivered to glittering bits.

“Take eightpence to pay for the broken glass,” said the offender, tossing Popplewell a shilling, “let the mess lie or sweep it up and give me the change in rum. I’ll not smash the rummer this time, egad! for I’ve not the coin to pay for it. What d’ye say, with the paper there?” he broke off, turning on Wix.

“I said, since my sayings interest you,” returned the Tolley Hall gardener with dignity, folding the paper and returning it to his tall hat and putting on the hat again,

“as there’s no word in the *Radical* of Grundall getting Brabycott.”

“You’ll find nothing in the *London Law Gazette* or the *Courts of Chancery Chronicle*,” retorted the other furiously, “and yet the thing is so. He has paid sixteen hundred into Court and come off with his Conveyance, curse him! and the title-deeds of a freehold worth thirty thousand or more. When the whole estate—every acre and tree, and brick and stone upon it—ay! and every horse and cow and pig, should have gone the way of the Money. And been gobbled up and swallowed down by the Chancery Fee Fo Fum.”

“Now why to Goodness should you wish for that?” cried Rumbold. “Wouldn’t better a poor wronged gentleman should come into the property of his kin?”

“The poor wronged gentleman, since you call him so, would agree with me,” said the other man resentfully. “‘If the cargo’s not to be mine,’ he’d say, ‘better to Burn the ship!’ My point is this. The ship’s not burned. One third of her lading’s salvaged. And Grundall’s richer by the third, when all is said and done.”

5

The wind, which had been getting up, uttered at this juncture a long, low, confirmatory howl, and rain lashed on the windows and door. The feeble little fire sputtered and turned pale, and many of the clients of ‘The Pure Drop,’ thinking of warmer hearths at home and following the Hall gardener’s example, jammed on their hats or caps as firmly as possible, turned their coat-collars up to their ears, and went out into the wild, wet blackness, with clashings of the heavy latch, and bangings of the door. Only the tougher spirits remained, for whose better comfort Popplewell now produced and threw on the gasping little fire an armful of damp sticks and kindlings, of which it all but died.

“’Twill smoke a bit and then burn up,” said the landlord to his patrons, as the fire, all but smothered, made a struggle for its life.

“’Twill smoke most like,” said Rumbold. “There it comes. Phew! And again! Phew!”

He wiped his eyes, stung by the smoke, on the end of his black silk neckerchief, got up from the settle, limberly, for his years, and went to the counter with his mug, and the mug of the old man next him, as the surly, argumentative tramp, who had been feeling in his ragged pockets, limped over from his shadowy corner, and ordered “a pint of four ale.”

“’Tis wettish weather for walking,” observed the wheelwright to this miserable figure.

“You’re right there,” said the combative tramp, not looking at the speaker direct. “Cursedly wet!”

“And raw as well.”

“And raw,” agreed the other sourly. “And with a chill in the rawness that bites you to the bone.”

“Ale’s cold drinking for a chilled man, and though I am no friend to spirits,” said the wheelwright, “I’d offer you a half-quartern to mix wi’ yours, if you will?”

As the other made a surly sound of assent, Rumbold gave the landlord the order, and taking the mugs that were now refilled, and putting the money on the counter, addressed a question to his neighbour in his mild, inoffensive way:

“May I make so bold as ask you, how it came that you, a stranger, came to p’int the attentions of the company to the Braby Chancery Case?”

“Since you ask a civil question I’ll answer it civilly,” the other man retorted, lowering his mug of beer and gin. He wiped his mouth with his dirty sleeve, and coughed and went on hoarsely: “They were reading the report that’s in the paper, and talking of the matter, in the tap-room of a public-house—at Wheatstone on the Great North Road.”

“Where you happened to look in?”

“Where I happened to drop in.”

“You having come from London?”

“I having tramped from London in this Blasted mud and rain. Said one oaf: ‘Here’s news to wake the people up to Tolleymead,—where nothing never happens ’twixt

Lammas and New Year's Day!' So I borrowed a skry at the newspaper and—— Are you satisfied, Mister?"

"Am I satisfied! Why, yes, I suppose I be, since I have had an answer. And yet I could have sworn," said the wheelwright, "as I have seen you before."

"You have never known the man you speak to now, though you may fancy different. I'm a man whose blood has turned to gall,—the kind that they use for ink! A man that has lived on Hope for years—and precious little else. Others have fattened at my expense, while I went lean and empty, and the thing that would have sweetened Failure has been denied to me. For it's worse for the dog that's robbed of a bone to see it flung to another dog, than if the other jumped at it and got a kick instead. Thanks for the lush, if thanks you want! Drink's said to be an enemy." He drained the mug and set it down, ending: "It's been a friend to me."

"Have you no other? Think a bit!" said Rumbold.

"I'm fagged past thinking. I'll put up my legs on the bench there, and try for forty winks."

"Can ye sleep there?"

"I can sleep there." He jangled out a laugh. "I have slept under railway arches, and under market-waggon, and in every kind of hutch or lair that can kennel a homeless cur."

"Won't ye come to th' fire a bit first?"

"A fire like that's a mockery to a man as drenched as I am. Besides, it smokes, and this damned cough shakes me enough without that!"

He shouldered back to his corner, where the bag and bundle rested, and threw himself down beside them, putting up his legs with a groan.

"Your ale, master," Rumbold said, going back to his old seat on the settle, and tendering the second refilled mug to the old man by his side.

"You're wunnerful kind. Thankee, sir! and your health, and many on 'em!" piped the old man, who was bent and small and wore a suit of Workhouse corduroy many sizes too big. "I were saying"—he lost himself in beer, and came out of the mug to finish—"saying to my

son Eddard—a wunnerful good son is Eddard!”—Rumbold glanced at the by-way-of-butcher, who grinned in a sheepish way—“saying as how I seed old Muster Braby buried in Eighteen Fifty-Five. Laid in the Family Wault he were—wi’ my werry own eyes I see him—along wi’ his Father an’ his pore wife—her as died when Mr. Wilfrid were chrissened, seven-and-twenty years before.”

“Dad were always fond o’ a Funeral,” explained the by-way-of-butcher.

“Wunnerful fond I were of ’em,” the old man piped cheerfully. “From a little ’un, an’ so were my Mother. An’ when Miss Ann Braby were buried—not in the Wault but in th’ Churchyard,—her havin’ died o’ the Smallpox, that Year when it come to we—Eighteen Fifty-Seven it were, and me but Five-an’-Sixty!—I helped to putt her where she lays—a Guinea being paid to Bearers!—no’th o’ the West Tower, near to th’ Liar’s Stone.”

Playing in his queer solitary way in the sawdusty dark behind the settle, Stephen could separate himself so far from the Stephen who was Captain of the Sea Rovers, as to follow with one ear and half his brain the trend of the recorded talk. Naturally he could comprehend the reference to the Liar’s Tombstone,—next to the Turning Yew Tree, the feature of Tolleymead Churchyard.

A slab of rough-cut freestone, this, built into the north side of the square flint-built West Tower, inside which, when the door in it opened, you saw the Bell-Ropes hanging down. On the slab was a grisly epitaph, dated 1534, which Stephen—for the sake of its grisliness—had painstakingly got by heart:

‘Evil did I Live
And Evil Doe I Dwelle.
Once I Lyed on Erthe
And Nowe I Lye in Helle.’

The legendary story being, that the Liar, a local Notability and a red-hot Patriot, had, after a crowning drinking-bout topped by bowls of blazing brandy, to celebrate the birth of the Reformation, and the establishment of

that pious Monarch, Henry the Eighth, as Defender of the Faith, had expired triumphantly impenitent, leaving a legacy of seven hundred gold nobles to the then incumbent of the living; on condition that he—the Liar afore-said—should be buried in the spot mentioned, and the Tombstone bearing the Epitaph, composed in his last moments, duly let into the Tower.

6

“Birds of a feather!” said the Rector’s clerk and handy-man, pushing over the halfpence the crippled cobbler had won of him at cribbage, with the promise to ‘have back that and more,’ upon the very next night. “His Reverence, the Rector, remarked to me—in the first month of his being presented to the Living—me having put him in possession of the heads as might be called,—of the story,—that an appropriate Text on Miss Ann’s Stone than the present one it carries, would have been ‘He that hateth his brother is a murderer.’”

“‘She,’ Mister—‘She,’” one of the younger men present corrected, a red-headed navigator of powerful build, in the customary fur-cap, pilot coat, moleskins, and leggings, whose nailed boots scraped on the stone floor as he slewed to render tribute to a spittoon: “Being a female—‘She,’ Mister!”

“We are told in ‘Oly Writ,” returned the Rector’s factotum, in a voice he kept for the Litany responses: “not to alter one jot, nor not one tittle, of the Revealed Word, young man.”

“No offence,” said the navvy, emptying his pot of porter, throwing down some coppers in settlement, and passing the pot to Mr. Popplewell to be refilled, with the adjuration: “Put a Brocklow on the top.” He pursued, handing the cauliflower-headed pot to the Rector’s factotum as a peace-offering. “Wet your whistle with that, Mister, and if so be as you are willing—tell us what start her brother got up to as made the young woman hate him so bad?”

“Why, I don’t know of anything partic’ler as he done to her, worse than having been born fifteen years later.

A squat, pasty young woman she were, nor not so young neither, wi' a high narrow brow and a long pinched nose, and a tight hard mouth, like her father's; and a pair o' black eyes that were hard and bright as shoe-buttons, and pretty nigh as small. And a cruel hand for a horse's mouth, ay, and for a dog-whip!" returned the clerk.

"Burn my eyes!" said the navvy, spitting expressively, "you're painting a Beauty as was a credit to the parents as brought her up."

"Why, the mother were a poor, weak, bullied soul, continual reproached by her husband for not giving him a Heir. His father, old Mr. Braby, had bought th' House and property from her own father, a ruined County gentleman who had no other child. Braby havin' made a fortin through follering the Sea, in the West Injy trade, folks said, as Partner o' some Liverpool merchants. And the name o' the place being Cott Hall, th' old gentleman turned it into Brabycott, and left it when he died to his eldest son, in hopes of carrying on the line. 'Twasn't as though th' body didn' do her best for to oblige him," said the wheelwright, perplexedly rubbing his prickly blue-shaved chin. "Son after son she bore to him, as never drew breath, poor woman! And when at last she had one, seeming like to thrive, she passed away, a-holding the hand of her maid, Susan Parmint, the one trew friend, I do believe, she had in th' 'varsal world!"

Roughly as Rumbold told the tale, with many turns of expression that might have been termed vulgar by the polished and genteel, there was so much genuine feeling in both accent and expression that his hearers sat in silence until he spoke again:

"I don't say whether her husband grieved,—I'd hardly think it likely. Or that when he slighted the unfort'nit babe, 'twas because he'd cost his mother's life! But I do know, that from his cradle to the day he quitted Brabycott, Mr. Wilfrid were neglected, ill-treated and despised."

The navvy broke in again here between puffs of rank tobacco-smoke.

"Why in Thunder didn't the young Bloke—being treated so onnatural—Run away to Sea for a Cabin—Hold on, I'm

wrong! 'Cos there was Money coming his way—in the Course o' Natur' presently, he stopped at home an' made the best of a jiggered bad job!"

"Th' property weren't Entailed, as the word is," said Rumbold. "The old man could leave on it just as he liked. And I've fancied Miss Ann she said to herself, that if she played her cards well, she might come in what you call the course o' Natur', to lay her hands upon it all!"

"Still, there was Money," objected the navvy. "An' nobody but a Born Fool 'ud run away from that!"

The sleeper on the corner bench coughed in his uneasy slumber, as the wheelwright sat upright on the high-backed oaken settle, and, still holding the glowing bowl of his pipe between his oak-brown fingers, pointed the stem at the navvy in a stern, impressive way.

"Born Fools talk in that manner, mate, meaning no offence to you! Hain't you ever heerd that for some folks there's p'ison in a glass o' ale? Similarly whether Money's a blessing or a curse depends on the sort o' hands as holds it. He shied away from Money, did Mr. Wilfrid Braby—knowing in his inward mind 'twould be a blight on him. He never knowed no happiness until he turned an' run from it. And well for him if he'd kept on a-running to this day!"

The hour approaching supper-time, you may take it that the conversation had been frequently broken in upon by the opening and shutting of the door, and the entrance and subsequent exit of now—persons of both sexes—requiring twopenny mugs of porter or ale to consume on the premises, together with screws of 'bacca, or porter and ale (or these liquids mixed) to be carried away in jugs.

It was getting dark and Stephen knew that the light would be set in the window, and his mother would be waiting behind it with supper ready for her boy. Yet he lingered in his lurking-place behind the high-backed settle, lured into listening to the talk by the sound of a well-known name.

For this Wilfrid Braby of whom men spoke was Stephen Braby's father. No other boy in the village owned a

father called like that. And Rumbold's deep and heavy voice was going on with his story, less like a man who tells a tale, than a man who talks to himself. . . .

7

"I've said as one reason why Mr. Wilfrid's father and sister be-littled him, was because he thought little of Money, or its value, as he growed up. He'd give it away, right and left, as a boy, whenever he got any, which presently served as an excuse for not giving of him none. And having no gentlefolks' clothes to spoil, and no gentlefolks' sons as play-fellows, he played ball, and marbles, an' buttons, with the sons of th' Brabycott servants—till it come to be Rounders and Cricket wi' the boys on Tolleymead Green. My son John—my dear boy as were killed in th' Abyssinian Expedition!—were a comrade o' Mr. Wilfrid's—an' Glazier Bendall theer."

"I were another on 'em," boldly asserted Haybitt, the by-way-of-butcher. "Not as 'tis a thing to boast on in these here latter days. Eh, Dad?"

"I reckons not," the old man piped in answer. "Theer were Glandell—but he lays in churchyard, an' Dorliss—as were transported. An' Gadd an' Cozens an' Trailing be in Work'us long o' me. That be all on 'em, Eddard, as I can call to mind now!"

"Exceptin' Landlord Popplewell," added the by-way-of-butcher, "who thought such a precious deal o' him, as I've seed his name chalked—times and times—at th' back o' yon cupboard door."

"That be nayther here nor there," said Rumbold uneasily. "'Tis easy twit a man wi' his failings when he can't stand up for hisself!"

"An' as regards my cupboard door," the voice of Popplewell interrupted, "there's a score or two chalked down to yourself, you may settle soon as you choose!"

There was a general laugh at this home-thrust, and, men turning towards the landlord, Stephen experienced once more the shudder down his spine.

“Come, Dad, shuffle up on your old pins,” said the butcher in some flurry. “’Tis gittin’ late, and after nine they won’t let ye into th’ House! Good night, all!” and dragging with him the pauper, who wheezingly protested, Haybitt unlatched the door, and the pair went out into the dark and rain.

“Now, master,” said the navvy, addressing Rumbold, who had gone to the counter for tobacco, “touching this young Thingamy’s running away—where in Thunder did he run?”

“That’s easy told,” said the wheelwright, taking advantage of the larger space now left at his end of the settle to lean back more easily and cross his lengthy legs. “Not a yard further than this identical village.”

“Jigger me! but I should ha’ thought he’d ha’ had a better spirit!” exclaimed the navvy. “Bust me and blow me tight if he wasn’t a soft arter all!”

“In going to live where he had friends instead of where he’d got none! Think again, mate!” advised the wheelwright, “before you call him soft! ’Twere Eighteen-fifty-one when he left home, I’d say he would be rising eighteen. . . . He came to me in my workshop, where I were planing a tail-board, looking white and wild and says to me: ‘What d’ye think, Old Rumbold,’—me being old to his notion, though little over fifty—‘Gregson Grundall and my sister Ann have won the trick they’ve played for. He’—meaning the harsh old man, his father—‘has turned me away from home. With just the clothes I stand in, and these few shillings,’—and he rattles ’em in his hand. ‘Heart alive! Mr. Will, what have you done?’ I says to him quite flabbergasted. And he says, ‘Nothing. Only told the truth about goings-on *he’s* blind to, and had the tables turned on me, and a thousand o’ bricks on my head. Only asked to be entered with some Premium paid in some decent House of Business, rather than go on living with him and Ann at Brabycott—more like a poor relation than a rich man’s only son! But I ha’ done wi’ him and his, from this day out forever, and as through him, I’m no way fit to make my way in life—I’ll earn my

bread as a workman or a labourer in this village, nigh to the walls of Brabycott Park, and the House where I were born!"

"Consarn me, if I don't think that showed a bit o' spirit," commented the navvy, slapping his moleskinned thigh. "He were over young to 'arn his bread along o' the pick an' shovel, or I'd ha' said, Take on wi' a Gang, an' try breaking th' roads."

"He made a poor workman too, poor chap!" interpolated Bendall the glazier.

"Lord bless my heart!" returned the wheelwright, rubbing his leg perplexedly. "He tried hard!—Hard he tried,—but he had more thumbs than fingers!—and if he heerd me say it he'd know 'twere not meant unkind! There never were a 'prentice more hopelesser at the Wheelwrighting. He spiled wood, and he blunted and turned my tenon-saws and planes and adzes till even I advised of him to try another trade. And with a few pounds in money he got by the sale of some whatnots, a gold watch that had been his mother's, along o' th' chain and charms, he bought a smock and overalls and took a place with a Dairyman—and lost it through lying overlate a-bed and forgetting to swill the churns."

"Then it were as th' reverend gentleman predecessing of the present Rector looked in on the old gentleman at Brabycott," suggested the Rectory handy-man.

"And found him tough as seasoned ash and hard as flint," said Rumbold, knocking the hot ashes out of his pipe on the palm of his hardened hand. "'My son,' he says, 'being back'ard from a child, and feeble in his intellects, has a great idea of his own cleverness, like other Naturals. Let him come back if he chooses, to this house that he were born in. The run of his teeth, his keep and clothes, he can have as he has had Previous. But his walks will be limited to the grounds; and I expressly stippylate that his low associates are dropped! 'He shall live at my charge here,' he goes on, 'or wherever I decide to place him: and Proper Control will be exercised, in case he breaks out again. And when I die, in Natur's course, his sister will act as his guardian. For my estate has been left to her,

my money is exclusively settled upon her, the Law of this land not compelling of me to make a Idiot my heir!" "

The figure huddled on the shadowy bench coughed again convulsively, as the navy hit his moleskinned thigh a smack with his open palm.

"Jigger the chap an' burn his eyes for a onnat'ral parent! And what did Young Guts do arter that? Cut up, or take it calm?"

"He was wonderful fond o' horses, and they of him," returned Rumbold. "He were took by-and-by as stableman to a horse-breeding farmer-grazier—and often druv his Master to markets and sales of Stock. Filled out, strengthened and set up by the rough life he were leading, he growed to be as handsome a young man as you'd see in a ten-mile round. His clothes, if poor, being neatly kep', and his linen clean and mended, along o' Mrs. Parmint seeing to it, that were."

"Dead years ago. A kind old soul as ever trod in patens," said Bendall.

"She had been part nurse, part lady's-maid to the poor weak soul, his mother, and nurse to Mr. Wilfrid too, till he were seven or more," continued Rumbold, between whom and Bendall the narration threatened to become a kind of athletic contest, the glazier letting the wheelwright talk until, coming to some point of interest, his rival would nimbly interpose and gallop on ahead. "And having put by a tidy sum before she quitted Service, she bought from Sir Cockley Bendish (as were Lord of the Manor in them days) the Freehold o' a little two-roomed cottage on the edge o' the Tolley Farm wheatacres. And living wi' 'Parmy,' as he called her,—and working for his living,—I'll lay as Mr. Wilfrid were happier than he'd ever been in his life! It was when the good old lady died, leaving him her bit o' Freehold and two or three hundred pounds in Bank,—that he fust went a bit wrong. But the next thing as falls out in the reg'lar course o' happenings——"

"Is," broke in Bendall, dexterously forestalling the wheelwright, "that the old gent to Brabycott ups and quarrels wi' his daughter, because of Miss Ann making too free along of a Married Man."

“The son of Lawyer Grundall, he were,” said Rumbold, getting ahead again. “Him as we call at this present day, Grundall the Grower. As were Defendant in the Chancery Suit and now owns Brabycott. Which he wrote—old Mr. Braby wrote—a letter to Mr. Wilfrid, saying, roughly enough and short enough—as he’s sorry as he’d used him bad! But as he’d find when he were gone, he’d Provided for him properly, in a new Will he’d had drawed up, and meant to Execute that day. Then he sends—old Mr. Braby sends——”

“A groom on a fast trotter,” thrust in Bendall, who had been lying in ambush for a chance to cut in once again. “To fetch Mr. Grundall Senior from his office at Tipping Marnet—which Grundall come out in his high-wheeled gig, wi’ his horse one lather o’ foam. An’ they was closeted over a hour afore Grundall left him. An’ his clerk—which were uncle to Dotsoe here, drove out early next mornin’ to Brabycott, in the fly from the ‘Rose and Lion,’ with the new Will in his bag. ’Twas arranged as he’d call an’ fetch it, when Mr. Braby had read it, and signed it afore Witnesses—he didn’t ask Dotsoe to be one! So Dotsoe drives off to ‘The Braby Arms’ in the village, to get some dinner; and when he gets back to Brabycott at the time as had been appinted, ’tis to find——”

“As Mr. Braby,” interposed the wheelwright, “had been took off by a Seizure,—as they found him in his library, stone-dead in his easy-chair. As for the new Will he’d made when angered wi’ his daughter, who’d bin sent to a clergyman’s widder at Brighton, who took boarders in——”

“That there Will”—Bendall, nimbly leaping in, pounced upon the climax—“That there Will had wanished off the face o’ this mortal planet.”

The navy suggested: “Swallowed?”

“Or burned, more like,” said Rumbold. “But being th’ height of summer, an’ Eighteen Fifty-Five were a hot un! there wasn’t no fire in th’ library grate for him to burn it in. And when you tear a Document, there’s bits of scrated Paper. So Miss Ann she proves the signed Will, and takes possession of all. And as if to show he doesn’t care, and contents himself without fortun’, Mr. Wilfrid

ups an' marries a young woman in a humble way of life."

"She come of Strolling people," said Bendall, sprinting ahead again; "Tinkers or Gipsies, one or th' other or both."

"But th' young woman, mind you, were honest and respectable," said Rumbold, "and moreover a regular Masterpiece according to looks and size. He seed her first at Marnet Fair where he'd gone on th' farmer's business—for the Tinkers was 'camped on a Common Land, back of the Fair Booths."

"She were kneading dough," cut in Bendall, "on a board laid over two buckets——"

"And she got up an' wapped her hands," Rumbold continued, recovering the lead and leaving the glazier in the rear, "as Mr. Wilfrid he rode by with a string of six young horses he'd come to sell to th' dealers at the Fair. Six feet two in her stockings—with such a clinking pair of eyes, and such a noble pair o' arms, and such a quantity o' yellow curls a-streaming from under her sunbonnet—as had slipped back on her shoulders—a whopping pair o' shoulders!—such a maid young Wilfrid Braby had never seed afore. He sold off his string o' horses without overly chaffering, and slipped away from the graziers and dealers as wanted to stand. He went back to where the Wans was, and scraped up the gal's acquaintance; and she being sick of a wandering life, and took with Mr. Wilfrid, they two struck hands for a Forthright Match—and she follered him then an' there! And having money about him, enough to buy a Licence—they were married by th' parson at East Marnet Parish Church."

"An' when he took his pardner home," inquired the navy at this juncture, "how did Miss Ann take it?"

"Why, she were away from Brabycott—'twere said in Foreign Parts. And as to how she took the news," said the wheelwright, "I couldn't tell you. But about th' time as Grundall's son took his name off the Firm's brass door-plate—an' took hissself into the Growing line—Miss Ann come back to th' House. Wi' her maid Sophy Petcher, a red-haired, sharp young woman, and never left the place no more until she took an' died."

“Which—” Bendall dashed in at this juncture,—“which she did in Eighteen Fifty-seven. Smallpox having broke out in the neighbourhood,—which she catched and were carried off. Leaving Mr. Wilfrid One Guinea to buy a Mourning Ring wi’——”

“And every stick and stone and brick and every blessed ha’penny,” said Rumbold, sprinting on ahead, “to Lawyer Grundall’s son. ‘To Gregson Grundall Esquire,’ says the Will, ‘my trusted friend and Executor. All property real and personal of which I die possessed.’”

“Him being the Married Bloke as her father had fallen out wi’ her on account on. ’Tis a rum world, narbors,” says the navvy. “Burn my eyes if it bain’t!” He added as he pouched his pipe, and jerked his thumb at Popplewell, signifying his intention to order some more liquor, “An’ then this pore unlucky chap—Wilford or whatever his name were—he goes to Law to git his share——”

“On the stren’th,” said Bendall, cutting in, “of there havin’ been a Will Made in his favour by his father before he died. He pores over his father’s letter, till he gets quite yellow with poring, and he somehow gets hold of the original Draft of the Will as has been lost. And the long and the short of it is that he goes with these Papers to some London Lawyers, an’ they Files a Bill and issues a Writ, an’ starts the Chancery Suit.”

“And when his money were all gone,” interposed Rumbold, “which wasn’t overmuch in the beginning, being got by the sale of the Cottage an’ th’ bit o’ ground left him by his nurse, he gits admitted by the Courts to plead his cause for Ekitty as a Pauper. An’ he have plead an’ plead an’ plod for Thirteen mortal year.”

“An’ now ’tis over, an’ the money gone down the throats o’ the Blistered lawyers,” said the navvy. “And he’s a Pauper double-dyed,—what’s gone of his wife?”

“She lives in the cottage Braby used to own,” returned Rumbold, “an’ pays rent fur it, workin’ with her hands from day to day to keep herself and her child.”

“A pint o’ porter over here in a tankard and look sharp with it,” ordered the navvy, plunging in his moleskins for the coin. “An’ she’s a woman wi’ a good name? A decent-

living woman?" he continued, throwing the coppers down on the bar, and rubbing the back of his neck.

"She's a woman wi' a name so well-respected in this here village," said Rumbold, "as the worst man in it, and the woman most looked down on, would—if there's half the good we're taught there is in Human natur',—strike the foul mouth that spoke a bad or bawdy word of her. Remembering thirteen years agone and what she done in Tolleymead when the Smallpox scourge were on us—I ask those friends who hear me now if I have spoke th' truth?"

"And he never came back?" the navy inquired, through a confirmative murmur of voices.

"Meaning her husband? Twice he come back. Your health."

"Samodithee!" The navy, after delivering himself of this extraordinary utterance, drank with a flourish, as though the word conveyed some sentiment.

"The first time was no longer than six weeks after he'd left her. The second," said Bendall, passing the post, "were over eleven year back. Since when nor bone nor feather o' the man has the poor soul set eyes on. Nor I could swear, has she had from him one single written word!"

"Most likely went to Foreign Parts," remarked the navy, passing Bendall the porter-pot. "Or croaked."

"Maybe. We're mortal, mate. Here's luck to you an' we."

"Mortal we are, that's mortal true. Samodithee!—as the folks say in the parts as I come from."

"And where might that be, master?" asked Rumbold pleasantly, as the navy finished the porter, wiped his broad shaven upper-lip, which glittered with the growth of strong red hair as though dusted with copper-flings, and set down the empty tankard on the bar.

"West Midlands. I'm a Newport man," returned the navy, heavily, pulling out his pipe and a lump of twist and a big horn-handled knife. . . . "But croaked I hope, for the woman's sake!" he went on yet more heavily. "Best thing she could do for herself 'ud be to pick up another man. No gentleman's blood in him this time, like th' ramshanklin'

chap she married. By Gum! th' blasted rain's gone by. 'Tis clearin' up for fine."

A customer had passed out without shutting the door behind him. It had swung back, showing a square of blackness like a velvet curtain, with a young moon lying on her back on the right hand, near the top. Stars pierced the blackness here and there. And on the clumped horizon, London glimmered and paled and twinkled, like a constellation plucked from the garden of the sky, withering on the dustheap of the world.

8

The navvy got up and kicked the door to, with a curse on the customer's bad manners, and the huddled figure of the snarling tramp on the bench in the corner moved. Said the hoarse voice which had in it a quality of refinement, startling by its contrast with the speaker's squalor and neglect:

"So the wife Young What'shisname picked up in a day amongst the travelling Tinkers—is living yet in the—howd'yecall—the cottage by the wheatacres? Has she taken up with another man, in place of her runaway mate?" The speaker dropped his legs to the floor, as a silence fell upon the taproom, and moved forwards with his footsore gait until the lamplight shone upon his face. He went on, pulling off his wreck of a hat, and pitching it into the corner, "There are people here I used to know—besides Popplewell and Rumbold there! More than ten years' desertion would justify her—I admit it! . . . Now answer my question. Is my wife my wife or not?"

"If you asks me: 'Do she live by herself or wi' another Party—said Party being o' th' opposite sex?' I'd answer 'Yes, she do!' Th' Party being her son, master, and yourn, an' no man else's!" The wheelwright got up from the settle here, and came forward with his heavy stride. "And you'll shake hands wi' an old friend, I hope, Mr. Wilfrid Braby, on coming back to Tolleymead after so many years!"

"So you've found me out, have you, Old File?" said

the tramp, shaking hands with Rumbold, as Bendall and Dotsoe and Popplewell and his stout wife came forward to shake hands too. Some of them furtively wiped their palms, as though his grip were clammy, and unpleasant to the contact of their more wholesome flesh. He went on, and the exhalations from his breath, and skin, and clothing tainted the air about him with a stronger spirituous reek: "A faithful wife, and a living heir to my ancestral acres. Curse it! that's joyful news, I hope, to greet a man's return? For a man may stay away for years, and—What the Hell's that, yonder?"

As the shaking voice yapped out the words, heels ground on the sanded flagstones, and Stephen shuddered from top to toe, as men turned to look at him. For almost without knowing it he had moved from behind the settle, when Rumbold had risen, and followed like a pup, close at the wheelwright's heels.

"Good Lord ha' mercy!—'tis the boy, and pat upon the question," said Rumbold, dropping his long clay pipe, which broke upon the stones.

"My boy!" cried the hoarse, shrill voice, with an ugly rattling laugh in it. And Steve, who was picking up the bits of the smashed clay with an eye to soap-bubbles later, found himself gripped by the back of his smock and hauled up from the floor. "Come over here under the lamp, you young devil, and let me look at you!" said the hoarse voice roughly, and a hot bony hand turned Steve's reluctant face to the light. . . .

And he found himself staring up into another face, sallow and lean, and haggard, with black eyes that were bright and empty too, set in ragged black hair and beard. And the breath that was flame scorched him—and even as he winced from the contact, he knew that the face was a drunkard's face, and the breath a drunkard's breath. . . .

"Snivel, you whelp," said the shrill cracked voice, "and I'll cut you off with a shilling! What d'ye say? Speak louder!"

"I wasn't a-cryin'!" gulped Steve.

"You lie!" contradicted the shaky voice. "Quick now! Up with you!"

And Stephen found himself sitting on the counter of the tap in the circle of oily light.

"Please, I want to go home," he whined, for the surface of the counter was chilly, and the wave had washed in again, this time, when men turned to stare. . . .

"Home be damned!" said his captor. "Snivel—and I'll disown you! A quartern of rum, Mother Popplewell, and leave the water out. And score it up behind the door, for I've not a coin left me! We're going to see if this youngster is a chip of the old block!"

"You won't give him none, Mr. Wilfrid, now! 'Tis cruel bad for children," the landlady protested, as she served him with the rum.

"He shall only have a sip, old girl!" said Braby, winking at her. "I'll take care of the rest of it, but a sip I'll have him take. Down it, you measly, white-gilled thing in yellow curls and petticoats! Stop! Here's the sentiment that carries down the drink. Look at your Dad, you puppy, and say the words after me. 'Here's to Unnatural Fathers and grasping Elder Sisters. May they suffer in the next world, as they made him suffer in this!'"

"Mr. Wilfrid!" Rumbold interposed, and to that rough-cut face of mahogany, Stephen turned his own white, childish face and scared, entreating eyes. . . .

Perhaps the latch of the door had clicked, unnoticed, a moment previously when cold damp air had saluted young Stephen's dangling legs. But now, as the edge of the pewter rapped his chattering teeth unpleasantly, and the brown, sticky liquor that brimmed it, smelt like his enemy's breath; and the staring faces of different hues, crimson, or brown or yellow, melted and swam together into hazy, featureless blurs, he became aware, with a rush of relief, that his mother was looking down on him, with the top of her bonnet brushing the cobwebbed beams of the ceiling, and her great grey eyes shining like two maternal stars.

Next moment the pewter measure was snatched from the hand of Stephen's enemy, and the liquor hissed on the embers of the weakly little fire. And, rendering testimony to Popplewell's honesty, raced up the chimney in a spurt of roaring violet flame.

“Who the hell are you?” Braby screamed, facing round on his assailant. “Why, it’s Malvina herself, by G——”

“The same, master, I reckon.”

She answered calmly in her deep, soft voice, the kind of voice you would expect from a woman of her grand proportions who—Rumbold excepted—stood higher by a head than the tallest man in the tap, and her heavy curls, the colour of red wheat, streamed from under her tilted sunbonnet, framing her grave, majestic face, and curtaining her columnar neck and ample, massive shoulders, as they had always done in Stephen’s memory of her. . . .

“The same!” Braby showed the tobacco-stained teeth in his straggling beard as he inspected her. “Hardly altered in the last thirteen years! Save that the strapping wench I left has become a handsome woman. Come now, ’Vina, haven’t you a word of compliment? Not for the well-dressed, good-looking husband you used to be so proud of once!”

“That’s to prove yet, master,” Malvina returned quietly.

Her attitude was almost bovine in its repose as she stood with her great arms hanging by her sides, enduring his haggard stare. Raindrops glittered here and there on the shawl that covered her bosom, softly heaving with her deep, even breaths. A wild fragrance of the fields clung about her clothing, so that no milky mother of the herd and byre ever smelt more sweet than she. And the deep corners of her lips, and the long corners of her eyelids were full of shadowy sweetness, so that Steve forgot his terrors in looking and worshipping. . . .

“Well?” Braby demanded, abandoning his cynical scrutiny. “Say what you think of me, ’Vina? Am I altered for better or worse?”

A chair scraped on the sanded floor, and the navy with the red head, who had not spoken for some time, but sat sulkily smoking, cleared his throat noisily and largely contributed to the spittoon. Then the voice of Stephen’s mother said, and though she barely raised it, its full, deep, breathy softness seemed to fill the entire room:

“That’s to prove yet, master, as I’ve said. Let’s be step-

ping home-along. 'Tis getting late, an' past th' hour for th' boy to be abed."

"What!" Braby jeered, as she lifted Steve from the counter and set his bare feet gently on the sanded stones of the floor: "D'ye welcome me to bed and board without a single question as to what I've been doing with my time in the last twelve years?"

Standing in the shelter of his mother and looking up at her, Steve saw a faint carnation creep up the sun-browned fairness of her throat. Her smooth, full cheeks were tinged with it, as she returned her answer:

"The fewer questions asked, I reckon, the fewer lies be told. Better be stepping home, master, before it gets to midnight."

"Home!" He yelped out a shrill laugh, would-be defiant and reckless. "The home I sold over your head and the head of your new-born child! What did you say when you learned that? Eh, 'Vina, tell me?"

"Why, that it were yo'r own place, to keep or sell at yo'r will. We'll not be turned out while th' rent be paid—and I ha' paid it regular—to Grundall the Grower—him being landlord now."

"Ay!" Braby's smouldering eyes blazed up. "I'd have burned the place level with the ground rather than he should have had it! But I gave the Bill of Sale to another man and the blackguard diddled me! One of these days I'll square with him—by Hell and all its Devils!" He said it with froth at the corners of his lips and a snarling, rabid viciousness that to Stephen, who had seen one, suggested a mad dog. "Now, here's the cream that tops the whole accursed, damnable swindle!" He mouthed dumbly while he gathered breath, and then burst out more violently: "Hark you to this! The Commissioners of the Court have sold Brabycott to whom? This bloated rogue—this kite from a stinking nest—Gregson Grundall the Grower! What do you think of that? Isn't it Rich? Now, 'Vina, what d'ye say?"

As he dropped on a Windsor chair near by, gasping for breath, and coughing, Malvina extended a massive hand, and touched him gently on the arm.

"Nobbut this—that every night sin' yo' went t' light, ha' barred in th' windows, as I promised when yo' went away 'twould burn till yo' come back. 'T'd be my man, I reckon. I've nothing more to say to it. Be that away yo're, a-lying on bench over in corner there?"

He nodded silently and she went to the bench, picked up the dilapidated carpet-bag, and took from the red-haired navvy's hand the sodden hat that he offered her with a quiet word of thanks. Then with her disengaged right arm she swung Stephen to her shoulder, where he sat astraddle, with an arm around her head, blinking like a sleepy young owl.

"Good night to ye, Mrs. Braby," said the wheelwright, studying Braby, who with some assistance from his strong brown hand had staggered to his feet.

"Good night t' yo'. . . . Now, Master! Cling yo' on tight, my sonny, an' don't fergot to duck yo's head at th' lintel o' th' door."

So the Three went out into the still black night full of sizzling and gurgling noises, from overflowing eave-runs and water-butts, and gutters full to the brim. As the door closed behind them, the red-haired navvy grunted, and something rumbled in his throat that might have been a laugh. But the silence was broken by no other sound, until Rembold's deep voice said solemnly:

"'Tis well for the weak men o' th' earth as th' Lord made women like that one,—to bear their babes an' their burdens, and say to 'em: 'Cling on!'"

Book the Second:

HOW STEPHEN SAW THE MARKET PLACE AND FELL
IN LOVE WITH A ROSE

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I

AND that is how the Shadow fell on the cottage by the wheatacres;—a solid Shadow of crapulous flesh and vitiated blood. A hateful Shadow, with a cursing voice, with bleared eyes and shaking hands; a spirituous thirst that could not be quenched, and a breath that burned like fire.

To Malvina he was her 'Master,' and, in the natural course of things, must be Stephen's also. No one would ever know how much her heroic love endured. But employing a term gleaned from War News, that fateful night in 'The Pure Drop,' to Stephen he was always 'The Enemy' or 'The Marching Enemy Corpse.'

It was curious to observe how this unhappy man, from his birth the innocent object of unnatural dislike on the part of his sister and father, justified their attitude, if hatred can ever be justified,—by the vicious degradation of these degenerate years.

As to where he had been, or what he had done while the Braby Chancery Suit lasted, it might be gathered that, like other miserable wretches in similar case, he had hung about the neighbourhoods of Westminster, and Lincoln's Inn Hall. A ramshackle edifice at this era, held up by blackened timber shores, on a cat-haunted desert of flagstones and sooty gravel; reached by a rusty iron gateway on the west side of Chancery Lane.

At the beginning, by his own account,—for he was given to retrospect, and whether his mood were mild, or maudlin, or malignant, the tale rehearsed, in most points proved to be the same,—his case appeared to have attracted some degree of sympathy.

When non-payment of certain costs, incurred at the beginning of his career as a litigant, had landed him in the Queen's Prison under the stigma of contempt, some unknown hand had paid his debts, and later, being admitted to plead his suit before the Court as a Pauper, he had subsisted precariously, as others in like case.

It was to his interest, as to theirs, to possess no regular subsistence, lest they should be Dispaupered and deprived of the right to plead. Like these others, haunting the Chancery Courts, while the mills of Equity were grinding, he had earned his bread by employments such as could be followed at night. He had copied for a legal printer at twopence per MS. folio, and set type in the printer's shop of a morning newspaper. He had gone on as a supernumerary in divers theatrical spectacles, had driven a night-cab for the proprietor of a mews, washed crockery for the keeper of a coffee-stall, and made toast for the midnight breakfasts of sewer-men and market-folk.

Later, as the rust of Chancery, and this vagabond life ate into him, the vice of intemperance developed in the man, and he sank from regular employ. He ceased—for the last three or four years of the Suit—to have a definite lodging. He slept where homeless vagrants sleep, and fed where the destitute feed.

He had swept a crossing near Lincoln's Inn, and reaped sixpence from a Queen's Counsel (one of two retained on the Plaintiff's side in the Case of *Braby v. Grundall*, at a fee of One Hundred Guineas each, and refreshers of so much). And suffering as this poor wretch undeniably had, he had been sustained through the atrocious ordeal, when his last hope had flickered out, by seeing the money go.

Some quality of indomitableness survived the deterioration of his character. He was sustained by things of which a weaker would have died. When Messrs. Tusser, Worrill and Stickey transferred their name-plate to handsome offices in Bank Buildings, and Tusser, an excellent family man, took a mansion in Hanover Square, while Worrill, who favoured country air, removed to a villa at Sydenham, and Stickey took a set of chambers in the neighbourhood of

Regent Street, 'So much the less for Grundall!' was the thought in the mind of their client. When signs of prosperity similar to these were developed by the Defendant's solicitors, the pinched and ragged Plaintiff knew a spasm of savage joy. Grundall would win, he sensed it in his bones, but every Term that ended without an ending of the Suit meant the less for Grundall in the end.

He felt defrauded that the close had left Grundall master of Brabycott. He had wanted the ultimate acre sold under an order from the Court. And now. . . . He grinned and showed his teeth like a stoat with a broken backbone, that, under the crunch of the keeper's iron-nailed heel, makes its last attempt to bite. He had lived on that hope of vengeance, growing bitterer and more cankered, until his blood had turned to gall, and his heart had withered in his breast. As for his soul, it lurked remote in some corner of his being, like some domestic animal immured in a deserted house. A wasted, shadowy, feeble thing, that has fed on mice and beetles, and licked the drippings from the basement-taps, till the water was cut off. And should have perished long ago, and yet lasts on in anguish, forgotten, it would seem, by Death, yet dying every day.

2

Well-meant attempts were made by old friends to find Braby employment. They were thanked with cynical humility, or were not thanked at all. A horse-breeding grazier offered him a job, but he had lost his nerve with horses. The farmer at Tolley Hall Dairy Farm would have taken him on as fogger. He declined, as ministering to the wants of beasts was unworthy of his status and education. He was ready to do anything; and yet it appeared, there was nothing that he could do! . . . Finally the Rector's gardener-clerk, who was Secretary to the local Benefit Club, engaged him as assistant bookkeeper at an infinitesimal wage. And the Master of the National School,—since Braby was a skilful penman, employed him, with the Rector's sanction, in heading copybooks.

Three gross of these, perfectly new, at threepence with marbled covers, were subsequently condemned by the Rector, innocuous precepts bidding youth:

‘Excel By Earnest Effort,’
 ‘Build Up Character Brick By Brick,’
 ‘Respect The Persons of Superiors,’

having been found adulterate with maxims of a revolutionary kind:

‘Lest Your Enemy Seize The Ship,
 Burn, or Sink Her to The Bottom,’

might have passed as patriotic, had not:

‘Fight For Your Rights, Revenge Your Wrongs,’

and:

‘Never Say Die Until The Other Man Is Dead,
 Then Life Will Be Worth Living.’

reflected the un-Christian violence of the writer’s state of mind.

What he earned, he spent at ‘The Pure Drop’ on rum or gin or whisky. When penniless the rowdier patrons of the tap treated him to make him talk. Or Popplewell would chalk a score against him on the door of the cupboard, which score, Malvina, hearing of, would do extra work to pay. What she thought of the dreadful change in him, she locked within her bosom. Not even Stephen would ever know the secret guarded there.

It would tax the powers of a more gifted pen than mine to portray Malvina, that simple and untutored soul, housed in so magnificent a frame. To her in her budding womanhood Braby had come as a lover, so unlike the other men she knew that he dazzled her simple eyes. Malvina had never heard the tale of King Cophetua and the Beggarmaid, but some scrap of a story akin to it had come bravely

in at this crisis, to be tacked to the dapper figure of a dark-eyed, undersized young man in careless country riding-dress and a jauntily tilted wideawake, with sharp steel spurs on his butcher-boots, and a horn-handled hunting-crop.

The love-match of the grazier's foreman and the girl who had travelled with the tinkers had not been quite as sudden as village talk described. But whether within one day or a week of days, their marriage had followed their meeting—the rapidity of the affair had rivalled the swift matings of a Southern land.

Braby had been passionately intrigued by her size, her strength and beauty; her purity, candour and innocence he discovered later on. What discoveries Malvina was fated to make were delayed by her simplicity and ignorance. And the strength of the passion he called to life could feed and did ere long—upon itself.

Through years of loneliness she had worked and waited in patient silence, and the heyday of her wonderful beauty had passed like a shadow on the corn. Now he had come back, and the bright dark eyes that had smiled under the brim of the wideawake hat were bleared and reddened with liquor, and the mouth that had taught her kissing, never opened without a jeer or a curse.

Now the wideawake hat, a mere felt rag, hung in a cupboard of the cottage, on a hook from which the rusty spurs depended by a strap. And the horn-handled crop—once, like the man, quite a smart and jaunty article, now like the man, the worse for wear—lay on the chest of drawers. . . .

Beleaguered Paris hungered within her iron girdle, and shivered in the Arctic snows of that unkindly year. There were pinching famine and nipping cold by-times in the cottage by the wheatacres, for all Malvina's earnings flowed down her drunkard's throat.

Malvina not being in the remotest sense a member of his congregation, the footsteps of the Rector hallowed not her threshold, the goloshes of the district-visitor shunned the unblest dwelling, and such seasonable doles of beef and

coal, tea and sugar and blankets, as came to cheer the poorest folk of Tolleymead on festal occasions, were never left by kindly hands at Mrs. Braby's door. Whether she would have taken them remains an unsolved question. But it might have been that even her pride and sturdy independence might have caved before the naked shelf, and the hunger of her growing boy.

There came a day when Stephen's curls were sheared by his mother's scissors. And the red flannel frock, subsequently destined to do duty as a scarecrow in the garden, departed in the wake of the curls. Under Stevey's hunkumed smock now figured a venerable woollen Cardigan, and his legs were eclipsed in a cast-off pair of adult hunting-cords. Once the property of the sporting tenant of Tolley Hall Dairy Farm, and the wheatacres, and bestowed upon Malvina, who worked at the Farm, by the farmer's kindly wife.

The knees of the cords came down to a pair of thick blue yarn stockings, and vanished in the gaping tops of clouted ankle-jacks. A Scotch cap with one frayed tail completed an ensemble which brought the housewives of Tolleymead to their front-doors to look. By the Plough Monday of 1871, the local excitement had abated. Paris capitulated on the date when Stephen went afield.

Eighteenpence a week earned tending plough, is something to keep the wolf from the door and buy bread to stay the hunger of a healthy, growing youngster. But when the wolf has got inside the door, and occupies the position of house-dog, though washed, and clipped and combed, and clad in nicely laundered linen, and renovated outer garments, he is still the wolf and nothing but the wolf, though he answers to another name. . . .

There came a day when the breakfast-crust had never been forthcoming. It was Dinner Time,—and the unhorsed plough leaned at the side of the furrow, pin-points of ice sparkling in the new-turned clay that patched coulter and share. The damp left by the ploughman's palm on the stilts was turned to hoar-frost; and the ragged tarpaulins that covered the steaming hind-quarters of the powerful Shire team, contentedly munching in their nosebags,

were frozen as stiff as the armour such horses used to wear in War.

They had begun to plough on the northward edge of the sixty-acre, down in a hollow. . . . To noonwards, as they topped the slope, the wind swept down on them. . . . A pinching, nipping, unseen force, scurrying among the withered leaves remaining in the hedgerows and the stiff, tall weeds on the unploughed land, and droning with a high, shrill note, like the driving-belt of a machine. Shuddering among the heavy locks shagging the feet of the horses; tossing about their manes and tails, clinking the iron traces and shaking the swingle-trees; and seeming to take a fiendish joy in making Stephen's chilblains tingle, and viciously tweaking his nose and ears.

Rooks and starlings pecked in the new-turned clay on the south-looking sides of the furrows. The ploughman sat in the shelter of the hedge, eating out of a blue basin, something that smelt good. . . . And Steve had had nothing at all except a drink of buttermilk saved from overnight, and a swede that had tumbled off a load, as the cart had lumbered past. . . .

His mother had promised to come to the field and bring him some hot dinner. He was hopeful, knowing his Masterpiece would never break her word. Now he saw her tall figure coming along the footpath that crossed the wheatacres, as he jumped about to warm himself, beating his arms, as grown men did, on his narrow, childish chest.

The heart inside sat down with a bump when he saw that Malvina carried nothing. She drew near and towered over him, and he looked up in her face. And it was drawn, and old and pinched, a mask of tragic anguish. A dead face, with nothing alive in it except the tortured eyes.

"Sonny, I come as I promised yo'. But I ha' browt yo' Nothing. Theer wer' nowhat——" Her voice failed her, and her mouth twisted awry: "Th' mistress up at the Dairy she paid me for the work this mornin'. But——"

Steve guessed at once that the Enemy had taken the money away. He had begun a whimper, but he bit it off and with an effort swallowed it, inflated his chest with a deep breath, and told the heroic lie:

"I doan' care nothin' wotever as you've not brought no dinner. I've had my dinner long ago, wi' Mr. Pover there." He brazenly jerked a chilblained thumb in the direction of the ploughman. "Bacon-dumpling an' taters, Mr. Pover he gi' me. An' they was prime." The water rushed to his mouth. . . .

"'Twere kind o' him!" Her face looked less like death and her eyes were melting. Kisses were not in common use between Malvina and her boy. But he leaped at her now as a young dog leaps, and dabbed her cheek with his cold little wet nose, as the young dog licks; and in doing this he grazed her accidentally,—just as the dog might have done—on the upper part of the arm. . . .

"You bin' hurted!" For she had caught her breath when he had knocked against her.

"No!" The monosyllable was like the stroke of a mellow, deep-toned bell. He urged:

"But you have. You flinched-like. Did—*he* do it?"

"I've told yo' No! Don't fare to git such notions in yo'r head."

She pushed his hair from his forehead, with her motherly touch, and left him, and went back over the unbroken stubbles to the path. As the bullying wind thrust at her back, and tugged at her thin garments, Steve saw how she had wasted. That was more of the Enemy's work. Then a rough voice hailed him from behind, and he turned from staring after her,—and Pover, surely prompted by Stephen's Guardian Angel, gave him a hunk of cold pork-fat and a lump of home-made bread.

3

The year 1871 went slowly by, and once again it was autumn, and Stephen's birthday came and went, and left him twelve years old. He worked afield and was poorly fed, and though he sometimes dreamed of flowers, the Voices of the Market had ceased calling in his ears.

They were sorely pinched this Christmas-tide, for Malvina had ceased working at the Dairy Farm, and though

she went three days in the week to Mrs. William Tibbitts on the Green, Saturday found her earnings short by the sum of seven and sixpence. A whole shilling and rather less than a penny, off each day.

The day previous to Christmas Eve, a hawker with a pony-barrow came to the cottage with Braby, who had met him at 'The Pure Drop.' . . . After a little chaffering a bargain was struck between them. Braby returned to the tavern with money in his pockets, and the purchaser began to pack the goods for which he had paid.

The first of all the household gods from which young Stephen suffered parting was the tall oak clock with the square brass face, with the moon and the ship at sea, the venerable clock behind whose coffin-lid door the late Mrs. Susan Parmint, in her neat print gown, and black net cap was, to Stephen's fancy, concealed.

"Let's take a squint inside 'er," said the hawker with the hoarseness of his calling, described by himself to Malvina as 'being a bit thick in the clear.' And on the key being reached down from a hiding-place on the top of the clock—Stephen had never thought to look there!—the door in the case was opened, and beyond a couple of rusty weights dangling from a rusty chain—there was nothing inside at all.

In addition to the tall oak clock, the three-cornered china-cupboard went away in the hawker's barrow, with some treasures the cupboard had displayed. Namely, two crockery spaniels with red and yellow collars, some glittering lustre vases, a pair of old Delft candlesticks, the plate displaying the Duke of Wellington's portrait in full regimentals, and the other, with the picture of the full-blown pink rose.

"Must they all go, mother?" Stephen ventured to breathe. "Even the plate wi' th' rose on it?"

"Ay. Though us might keep that one. Look yo' here, Mister——"

"B. Faggis," the hawker reminded her, deftly twisting a rope of straw round the blue Delft candlesticks: "Joram's Road, Lower 'Olloway, Number Sivinty. Where the Old

Fashioned Wooden Baulks is, what the Wagrants used to kip on, in the days when them Rummy old Busters lived as made the Antigreeks."

"What sort o' things might they be, making so free as to ask yo'?" Malvina queried, still mindful of Stephen's wistful face. . . .

"The Antigreeks? Why, harticles such as Oil Pictur's; Painted Chaney Vawses, Stone Images, Carved Woodworks, and Fancy Chests o' Drawers," returned Mr. Faggis. "Likewise harticles of usefulness, such as Cupboards, Beds, Footstools, Chairs and Sofys,—made by them ancient Customers as lived Hunderds o' years ago, an' turned theirselves out such Precious Guys in the 'aberdashery and tailoring line. Different built to wot we are they must a' bin' to wear such toggery, I says—and set or lay in comfort on sich chairs an' sofys and beds! But my Missus thinks—and there never was such a Oner for thinkin' as the Missus!—that they got used to 'em by degrees, like the Plank Beds in the Jails."

"Ay. Being used to different things, I reckon, they knowed no difference," Malvina conceded, handing him the plates.

"You did say as we might keep one," Stephen shyly reminded her, siding close to his mother and plucking at her skirt.

"Look here, young chap," said B. Faggis, wiping his shiny crimson face with the end of a bright silk neckerchief. "Since you're so un-common fond of 'em, I'll make you a present of one. Never you mind about your Dad. I'll square with him, I reckons. Say which you sets your 'art on—Old Nosey or the Flower?"

"Don't yo' be silly, Stevey," said his mother with tender roughness, as Stephen retired shyly into the shelter of her skirts. "Speak up an' thank th' gentleman!"

"'Cording to what I heerd at the public on the Green—me being a stranger to Tolleymead—Kilburn, Edgware, Barnet and Watford being my usual Round—Young Shaver here has a sight more right to the name of gentleman than I 'as," hinted Faggis, looking sharply from Malvina's face to Stephen's and then back again. "How-

sumdever," he added, "that ain't my affair. Which Plate do the Shaver fancy?"

"The rose," Stephen whispered. "Please, sir, the plate wi' the rose on it!"

"'Tis a bit o' real Staffordshire I had before I married," said Malvina, "as was give me by the same dear friend from whom I had yon mug." She nodded towards the mug that bore the flourishing gilt legend, and the design of the bridal couple, walking towards the staring scarlet church. "Our Stevey, yo' shall have th' mug. Say that yo' thank th' gentleman an' would liever as he kep' th' plate wi' th' rose, fur which Money ha' bin' paid."

"But I'd rather hev' the rosy plate," Stephen asserted boldly.

"'Twere the first thing as he cried for when he beganned to take notice-like. An' now he seems fonder of it nor ever," Malvina explained. "Nor my Master wouldn't ha' sold it now but fur wanting the money bad-like. But as for being beholden to yo'r kindness," said Malvina, "I doubt but if he knowed of it, my Master would object."

"You take an' leave your Master to me. He knows where to find me if he wants me, my address being Sivinty Joram's Road, Lower 'Olloway. For there I 'as my Little Place, looked after by my Missus," said B. Faggis, a square-built, red-faced, blue-shaven, cheery man in a rabbit-skin cap, a blue cloth coat, moleskin kicksies, the kind of drab gaiter popularly known as mud-pipes—and boots so blacked that he might have been an advertisement for Warren, with the rose, thistle and shamrock worked upon the insteps, in an elaborately elegant design. "Second-'and Furniture and Various," continued Mr. Faggis, "Books, China, an' Antigreeks, what you might call a Branch. And Customers accommodated in the Exchanging Line. This here little prad o' mine come to me in that way," pursued Mr. Faggis, indicating the pony. "I swapped a Parlour Sweet for 'im in red moreen an' walnut, and I wouldn't part with the hanimal for the same in hoak an' plush. And wot's more, he knows I wouldn't. Don't you, Smiler?"

And he touched his fur cap civilly to Malvina, and poked Steve playfully in the ribs with the butt-end of his driving-

whip, and tickled up the pony so scientifically with the business end of the implement, that Smiler broke into a rattling trot and jolted the barrow away. Perhaps it was to drown the nagging voice of conscience reproaching him with reference to the sale of Mrs. Parmint's clock, to say nothing of her corner-cupboard and china, that Braby got furiously drunk upon their price that night. So that Steve was wakened from sound young sleep somewhere about midnight by the Enemy's heavy, stumbling tread, and shrill alcoholic cursings, and, sitting up in his pallet-bed in the angle of the thatched roof under the attic window, listened until the curses subsided into growls, and Braby had kicked off his boots and thrown himself upon the bed.

Then as Stephen clenched his hands, hatred for the author of his being tingling through every cell and nerve of his vigorous young frame, there came a step on the ladder by which you reached the attic, the square of light that showed the edges of the floor-hole that you crept through altered its outline, and a well-beloved shadow fell across his little pallet-bed.

His mother's.

"Lie yo' down again, my lamb," Malvina whispered. "Your father's none too well to-night, so I've come a-seeking lodging wi' my lad. No!—I'll none take th' coverlet, nor yet yo'r blanket," and as Stephen thrust these things on her, her powerful arm reached over him and her maternal hand tucked back the thin coverings as before. "I've my old cloak to roll me in, as has served through many a winter—and I'll lie down beside yo' as comfurable as may be. . . . Go yo' to sleep, and so will I. Nay—he's awake an' moving! I mun go to him. Bless yo', my own lad!" she whispered, and vanished down the ladder, leaving Stephen sitting up in bed, frowning and clenching his fists.

When the hateful voice broke out again in a spate of ugly objurgations, the boy gave back the man's abuse with interest, under his breath. . . . But when the sound of hic-coughed oaths and heavy trampling footsteps was mingled with the ugly noise of blows, sometimes falling on senseless wood and sometimes on living flesh, Stephen rolled from his pallet-bed in the gable of the tiny attic and crawling, in an

agony of love and fear, half down the crazy ladder, he saw by the light of a flaring dip that had guttered all over the candlestick, his mother with dishevelled streaming hair, and her nightgown torn so that the sun-brown of her neck showed in contrast with the snow of her bosom, shielding her face with one upraised arm, whilst with the other she warded off the blows of Braby's battered hunting-crop.

"Ha' done!" she kept repeating mechanically as the blows fell and fell again, and Steve clung to the ladder like a frozen starling on a branch, "Ha' done, Braby! Yo'll wake the boy, screeching like that. Ha' done wi' it! Eh, yo' men!" . . .

"Hear her!" cried Braby, who with glaring eyes, and mouth expanded in a savage grin, and with an unwholesome clammy sweat running down his face and naked chest, presented a hideous appearance. He lowered the whipstock to recover his breath, and went on, speaking between pants and gasps, for violent exercise had winded him: "Listen to the devoted wife pleading with her tyrant: '*Don't wake the boy!*'" He drew a rattling breath. "'The boy' is all she thinks of. The virtuous Griselda—the chaste spouse whose downcast eyes shun men. Why, for a penny I'd have the cub down, set him on that chest of drawers and let him see the show out. Ay!—and for two crooked pins I'd lead you in a halter to Wheatstone Market, Friday, and sell you for the highest bid. Aha!—I caught you then!"

The thong of the crop, adroitly used, had fallen across Malvina's neck, between the ear and shoulder. Her low cry wrought on Braby's torture-lust as spirit poured on flame. He fell upon the woman then with such a murderous frenzy, that her stout heart fainted at his look, and Stephen shrieked in fear. At which outcry the Enemy looked about and with a hoarse triumphant scream came charging at the ladder. From which, as his weight crashed on it, Stephen fell, and knew no more.

He came, climbing out of bottomless depths, full of dark smoke and vapour, back to the consciousness that his face and breast were wet and that cold air fanned on him. He struggled, and his mother's arm came comfortingly about

him, and his mother's voice assured him that he was quite well now.

Surprised, despite some aches and pains in various parts of his anatomy, to hear that he had been otherwise than well, Stephen turned his wondering stare upon the face of his Masterpiece, who had put on a worn old cotton print gown over her night attire and tidied the disordered masses of her abundant red-gold hair. She kissed him, and Stephen clasped her neck and felt her wince and shudder, and lifted his cheek from the cruel red stripe, and saw it—and recollected all. He dropped his arms, and she helped him up, and though he felt weak and dizzy, he was quite well as she had said—When had she told him wrong?

“Be it last night?” he faltered, “or else to-morrow morning?”

For though a fresh dip candle flared in the tin candlestick upon the table, the window that swung open showed pale grey light outside.

“’Tis morning, nigh,” Malvina said, moving lightly hither and thither as she opened drawers and shut them again, and rolled and folded certain worn and much-patched little garments which Stephen, munching bread and cheese set by overnight for his breakfast, recognized as things made familiar by faithful daily wear.

“Be it rainin’?” he asked, with a puzzled look.

“No, ’tis quite fair,” said his mother.

“I thowt I heerd th’ gully-neck a-snorin’, that were all.”

Which gully was a drain outside the back door of the cottage, communicating by a grating and a length of rusty pipe with a culvert at the bottom of the garden. When it rained so heavily that the wooden funnel communicating with the water-butt overflowed, or the suds of Malvina's weekly wash-tub were emptied down the grating, the gully snored and gurgled as Steve heard it gurgling now.

No!—the snoring came from the bed. With hate and horror in his white young face, Stephen looked over his shoulder. There lay the Enemy in a drunken sleep, routing and grunting like a hog. An Enemy none the less hideous and foul that his livid face with its shut and twitching eyes, and open mouth gaping angry red in a confusion of un-

kempt moustache and beard, was topped by a bandage of wet roller-towel stained in the folds with blood. . . .

“He bain’t a-going to git up agin’ an’ pitch into both on us, be he?”

To that shuddering question of Braby’s son the naked toes of the veinous yellow foot that dangled over the edge of the disordered bed twitched as though they meant to convey that their owner would have liked to. But the heavy snoring that had momentarily checked while something wrought and struggled in his yellow, stringy throat (as though some of the devils that possessed the man were fighting to escape from him) had now begun again. And Malvina said, not looking round, but tying a few worn articles in a blue-spotted cotton pocket-handkerchief, and hunting in a thin old moleskin purse, from which she extracted a coin:

“He’ll not wake yet. Eat up yo’r bread an’ drink yo’r tea”—cold tea, which she had heated on the ashes of the fire in a battered little tin saucepan—“and then come yo’ here an’ let me put yo’r Sunday shirt on yo’. An’ yo’r clean smock, as both be aired, and fitty for yo’ to wear.”

So Stephen, shrunken to a little child by her tone and the beckon of her finger, gulped his last mouthful and supped his last sup, and came and stood by her knee. But the question seething in his breast could not be kept from utterance. He got out, with his scared blue eyes rolling in the direction of the bed:

“Mother, how did he git hurted like that?”

Malvina was buttoning the clean Sunday shirt. She got an old bone comb out of the table-drawer, took Stephen by the chin, combed his rumpled curls, and said as she achieved a parting:

“He run agin’ summat as caught him flush on the end o’ th’ chin an’ floored him. That’s no great cut upon his head. The table-edge did that. And I reckoned th’ bleeding did him good. Now yo’ll put on yo’r clothes.” She went on as Stephen obeyed: “Fur when yo’r Father comes to his mind, ’twon’t do fur him to see yo’. Eh, th’ men!”

With a dreadful sinking underneath the buttons of an old sleeved Cardigan waistcoat, a gift of the wife of the

tenant of Tolley Hall Dairy Farm, Stephen stammered with jerking lips:

“Where—where be I to go? Be you angry wi’ me, Mother?”

“Do I look like I were angered?”

Her eyes brimmed over with the words. The slow tears fell on the bosom of her old print gown, and now her arms were round Stephen, and his own face was wet with them. She told him in her deep, soft voice, readying his garments as she spoke, with deft maternal touches:

“Yo’ be my own dear, precious lad, and that yo’ allus will be. But yo’r Father——”

Malvina had not realized that Braby’s son at all resembled him. But in the look of bitter hate that the boy now cast towards the figure on the bed was stamped Stephen’s paternity. She said, moving the boy away and steeling her great heart to be stern:

“Yo’r Father be yo’r Father. Yo’, Steve, allus remember that unless yo’ wants to be Hammered. Fur, if I Hammered him for yo’—and th’ Lord’s my judge that blow I struck was to save his doing Murder!—I’d punish yo’ fur going agin’ the Word that bids yo’ Honour him.”

“But when I see him beat you wi’ th’ whip!” Stephen gulped out, choking.

Said Malvina:

“I’m not the woman I was for strength, there’s no use to deny! Yit never was there a minute to-night when yo’r Father had the upper hand. ’Twas when yo’ falled down th’ ladder and he fared to git a-lamming yo’, that I lost my patience wi’ him, and give him Swaffham, as yo’ see. When he wakes—and he won’t fur long!—for I mixed him a drink to comfort him an’ dropped some Laudanum in it—(out o’ his little bottle of drops he takes to make him sleep)—’twill be bad fur him to see yo’ here, and bad fur yo’, I reckons. So go to Wheelwright Rumbold, as ever’s been a friend to us, an’ ask him fur to take yo’ in, an’ let yo’ bide three days.”

With a throb of joy Stephen gasped:

“Then you means me to come back again? You bain’t a-sending of me away for good?”

“Never, my darlin’!”

He learned how strong those great arms were, as she caught him to her heart.

“No, Stevey dear! Never, my lamb. ’Tis for yo’r own sake I send yo’. Most like your Father’ll ha’ forgot how he made out to serve yo’—an’ what I had to do to him—when he wakens up again. But supposing not,—it’s best for yo’ to be clear out o’ th’ sight on him; I’ll have a better heart, my dear, being sure that yo’ be safe.”

“And you? Will you be safe wi’ him?”

“Trust me. As safe as churches. Now kiss me and take th’ bundle. There’s a clean shirt inside of it an’ a handkercher for Sunday, which will be Christmas Day, yo’ know, to-morrow being Christmas Eve. Come back the night o’ Boxing Day, that being Monday. I’d saved this shilling for yo’r Christmas box. Put it in yo’r pocket!”

Stephen already owned a penny, and here was a whole shilling to lavish. He said, glowing with a project sprung from this access of affluence, and with sweet music, long unheard, sounding in his boyish ears:

“Mother, supposin’ I didn’ go away to Mr. Wheelwright Rumbold. Jest think how tidy it would be if I wented up to London instid?”

“All by yo’rself, so litt’l as ye be, an’ never havin’ set foot theer. Yo’d be lost!” Her bosom stirred with a faint breath of dismay.

“I wouldn’ git lost.” Stephen’s eyes were bright, and his look alert and confident.

“But three whole days—an’ you wi’ nowt in yo’r pocket but a shillin’?” she said. “How would I close my eyes o’ nights wi’ you a-clemmin’ in th’ streets? They black, bad streets. Yo’r Father be no better since he knowed them. London, yo’ say! What put th’ notion o’ London in yo’r head?”

“I dunno. But I wants to see it. Don’t Queen Victoria live theer? An’ ain’t th’ Markits theer to see, the Borough an’ Covent Garden ’fore all? Wi’ all the holly an’ mistletoe, an’ oranges an’ nuts an’ lemons. . . . An’ hot-’us flowers. Roses—O my!” He snuffed them in the air.

“Let me think a minute!” Malvina said. As she thought, the flowers were calling: “You who love us—you who love

us, come, come and play!" But Steve's mother heard nothing but the snoring from the bed, as she weighed the risks and the advantages. . . . If Stephen sought asylum under Rumbold's roof, Rumbold would never by look or word betray the dire necessity that sent the boy thither. But Tolleymead gossips would whisper and pry, and Braby's liquor would betray more. And soon his ill-usage of his wife and child would be common talk for all. *Eh, the men! . . .*

"If yo' be sure yo'll come to no harm, nor do naught as I've forbid yo'——"

"I promise not to do no harm, nor nothing as you've ferbid!"

Stephen licked the forefinger of his right hand and gave a preparatory flourish of the digit. . . .

"This wet an' this dry—Cut my throat if I tell a lie!"

"You stop! I don't want none o' that theer nasty wicked rubbish. Yo' gi' me yo'r promise—honest—an' go wheer yo' will."

"I promise Honest—an' I'll be back by supper-time o' Monday."

"Then may Him as they tell of in the Good Book, as were nowt but a little naked child wi' no shelter but a stable, on the first Christmas Eve as iver dawned upon th' world, take care o' my poor wandering lad and bring him back o' Monday. Yo'r Father's stirrin' in his sleep. God keep yo' safe, my dear!"

She wound Steve's thin old comforter about his neck, and put on his cap and kissed him before she almost noiselessly unlocked the door. And then—he was out in the grey-white dawn that stung and bit and nipped him, and the door shut, and the key turned and he heard her put up the bar. He might have heard her sob, perhaps, if he had paused to listen, but the pipers of the Market were piping, thin, sweet and far away. As they had piped to Stephen before the Shadow fell, he heard them; and knew that he was free at last to answer to their call.

The cold of the December dawn bit you like a weasel, and it had rained early in the night, and then set in to freeze. So that a thin film of ice rendered the ground slippery, and icicles hung from the cottage eaves and the rose-bush by the door.

Tolleymead Church clock, deep-mouthed as a blood-hound they kept chained in the Hall stable-yard, struck twelve strokes and the quarter; and it was the morning of Christmas Eve. And the Moon, very high and bright and small, was sailing away southwards, and a wonderfully sparkling blue-green star hung low in the eastward sky.

Perhaps it was the Star that had led Three Wise Men to the Stable at Bethlehem, thought Stephen, remembering the story his mother had read him from the Book, as he drove his cold fists deeply into his breeches' pockets, and digging his square young chin well down inside his ancient muffler, passed through the little frosty gate of Malvina's wedge of front garden, and stepped upon the cartway leading out on the Tolley Brook Road.

His breath as it went steaming up through the meshes of old red woollen—the runnel trickling beside the road under its cover of ice, knew no more of their destination than Stephen Braby. The one rose skywards, the other trickled towards the agglomeration of mounds of earth, piles of broken brickbats and stacks of tarry timber, dignified by the designation of The Railway Station Works.

For the Great Northern Railway, now running through the middle of the County, was taking measures to establish a Junction at High Marnet presently.

Some views in the direction of a Station at Tolleymead had borne fruit in an increased demand for beer at the village public-houses, on the part of certain large men in fur caps or sou'westers, pilot-coats and moleskins, armed with heavy bright shovels and weighted picks. Volcanic upheavals of gravel and clay, deposits of tarred sleepers and lengths of rusty iron, had resulted in a single line to the Branch Works at Edgware, up and down which small goods-engines panted at intervals, dragging loads of iron

and bricks and stone. At six in the winter mornings it brought the large men to Tolleymead, and punctually at five in the afternoon carried them away. In the interval between these journeys, the large men in moleskins propelled themselves up and down the line in trolleys, with iron-shod poles.

Stephen's hobnails clinked upon the Tolley Brook Road in the direction of the New Railway Station Works. Presently his paces quickened to a trot. Soon, turning off the Tolley Brook Road into a footpath traversing meadows, there rose up the tall attenuated shape of a crane, worked by a donkey-engine, sticking up over some huge, frosty, shapeless mounds of gravel and brickbats and stone. Amongst these, the white-rimed tarpaulin roof of the night-watchman's shelter struck a note of human company, and the rosy glow from a brazier, more than hinted at warmth.

Something more—the unmistakable aroma of boiling coffee,—plucked at Stephen's chilly little nose, and a gruff laugh, issuing from unknown subterranean regions, made him nearly jump out of his boots.

Cautiously approaching round the corner of a mountain of wheelbarrows, he found the night-watchman of the Works, whose business it was to guard the mountain of wheelbarrows aforesaid, the donkey-engine and the crane, a stack of tarry sleepers and a heap of rusty metals, from the dishonesty that prowls by night. As he squatted on the folded sack at the door of his shelter, basking in the warmth of his brazier, talking in growling undertones with an unofficial assistant, and keeping an eye on a tin coffee-pot that sat upon the blazing coals, with a woman's shoulder-shawl tied about his head to keep off the night-frosts, and an empty sack or so secured by strings about his shoulders, it struck Stephen that he would like to be the Watchman of a Works. And creeping a little nearer, not with the design of eavesdropping, but to snatch a whiff of the fire, he heard, mingled with the hoarse talk of the watchman and his crony, a heavy sound of snoring, that was like the Enemy's. . . .

“An' he stays here, lodgin' o' nights——” said the watchman's crony hoarsely.

“Not so fur away but ye kin hear him snorin' if ye'd

a mind," the watchman responded, glancing over his shoulder into the pitch-black depths of his tarpaulin shelter, from which undoubtedly issued the snores. Not quite like the Enemy's, Stephen decided, as the firelight lured him closer yet, and the coffee-pot bubbled on the bright coals. Stronger, deeper; without chokes and gurgles; the healthy snoring of a lusty, powerful man.

"Would ye say," the watchman's mate spoke lower, acting possibly on a hinted warning, "wimmen being wot wimmen are—as this woman tempts him on?"

"Why, seeing Mackilliveray hisself complains as wot she never looks at him——" the official watchman was beginning, when, pausing to spit and leaning aside for this purpose, he saw Stephen and called out in a terrible voice: "Now then, who are you?"

"Nobody, please, sir," piped Stephen, chafing his tingling nose and ears with the ends of his woollen comforter. "Only a boy, sir!"

"'Spectable byes," said the watchman's mate forcibly, "be at this hower asleep abed."

"Supposin' they 'as beds to be in," said the official watchman, guardedly. "If they're young tramps or infant prigs, they prowls an' lurks like you."

"Please, sir, the fire looked so warm, I couldn't keep from nigh it," pleaded Stephen, gloating over the brazier as he spoke. And he looked so very cold a boy that the watchman's heart relented.

"Sit down a bit and warm yerself, then," he said less roughly, and tossed a dilapidated bit of sacking over to the boy. He even took up a burned old poker that lay near, and roused up the fire, saying, "And I wouldn't wonder but by and by I might spare ye a sup o' corfee," jerking his thumb at the bubbling pot exhaling the alluring smell.

Coffee!—Stephen settled down like a stray terrier with one eye on the red-hot brazier, and the other on the hospitable watchman, and wished that his Masterpiece could know of his good luck. He was sleepy and blinked like a young owl, as he squatted, closely hugging his knees, in the warmth of the fire; and presently he propped his chin upon the knees, for he began to nod. And the voices of the two old men'

came in between whiffs of slumber. And Mackilliveray—and the woman who could not be got to look at Mackilliveray—came back into the talk again.

“So this yere man—Mackilliveray, and where he got sich an oncommon queer name I don’t suppose you could tell me,” recommenced the watchman’s crony presently; “so this here Mackilliveray—having clapped eyes for the first time on the fine young female you’ve named to me——”

“Was a year agoe last November at ‘The Pure Drop,’ Tolleymead Green. On the werry night her good-for-naught of a husband he come home again——”

“An’ knowin’ her by the gen’ral voice to be a vartuous young female,” continued the crony, rapping out his pipe, “he yit can’t drive her out of his head, not, as he ought, by takin’ up some willin’ young ’oman; nor by shiftin’ to another road-gang an’ goin’ North for a change,—but hangs about, a-follering her with his greedy eyes, in the neighbourhood o’ wheer she’s workin’, an’ findin’ that no good at all for his Bad purpose!—scrapes acquaintance with the poor weak sot as she’s had the misfortin’ to marry—and keeps him soakin’ at th’ tavern night after night.”

“Mebbe he thinks to bring her down to beggin’ and prayin’.” The watchman struck a sulphur match and lighted his pipe anew. “‘Mister, doan’t ye lead my man into ’dulging of his weakness. He be a drunkard well I knows, but he’s worse since he knowed you!’ And though she puts up with her ’ard fate, and never passes word wi’ him, this ’ere Mackilliveray, being of a sangewine natur’——”

“Not havin’ ’ad sim’lar advantages to yourself, eddicationally speakin’,” said the watchman’s mate, “might I harsk you wot you means by sangew-ine?”

“A sangew-ine man,” said the watchman, “is a bloke so outrageous ’opeful, that he putts a double geranium in the front parler winder before he’s even started to dig the foundations of his house.”

“An’ a corn-founded old Magpie,” said a deep bass voice, unexpectedly rumbling out of the darkness behind the watchman, from whence the heavy snoring no longer came, “is the man who lets his roof to you, to snatch a wink o’ sleep

under,—and sets at the door and chatters so as you can't git none!"

"No offence to you, mate." The watchman moved his body out of the entrance of the shelter, as a man much bulkier than himself crept out on hands and knees. "A word from you 'ud have stopped my jaw. Turn in again and chance it. You won't have funder grounds, I lay, for lodgin' a complaint."

"No, burn my eyes! I've had enough," said the person called Mackilliveray, whom, as he emerged into the ruddy glow thrown by the fire in the brazier, Stephen recognized as the burly, red-headed navy who had been drinking at 'The Pure Drop' on the night when the Enemy came home.

"Take you my place on these here sacks, I know where to find me others, while I git out some cups an' things I've stowed away in there. The coffee's biled this long time," said the watchman hospitably, the hint of refreshment proving so far acceptable to his aggrieved lodger that he lumbered down upon the folded sacks without another word.

The deep-mouthed clock of Tolleymead Church bayed one o'clock and the half-hour, while the watchman clinked crockery in the shelter, and his mate smoked silently on. Stars twinkled only faintly now, the moon was no more visible. . . . Chill, numbing blankets of fog closed in about the tarpaulin-covered hill of wheelbarrows, the mounds that kept the draught away, the shelter that was like a cave, and the group about the fire.

Shadows were swallowed up as in a yawning gulf of blackness. Bodies were seen by spurts and flares of light from the blazing coals. Faces were demoniacally red, with shadows thrown all upwards. Hands were dyed as though newly drawn from pails in which a pig has bled. The whole scene was so decidedly suggestive of Sea Rovers engaged in an orgy, that Stephen could only hug his knees and chuckle to himself.

Mackilliveray had stepped into the part of Captain of the Sea Rovers, by reason of his size, and flaming hair, and the scowl upon his heavy face. He had sat where he had squatted down, leaning against the watchman's shack,

staring with small, fierce, light-hued eyes, lashed with hairs as red as the hairs upon his head and the great bare arms folded upon his breast, directly at the fire.

Though, for all the fire could do—it was cold, and the fog had a numbing bite of its own for unguarded human extremities—Mackilliveray seemed unconscious that the weather was severe. His rough pilot-coat was tied about his neck by the two sleeves, carelessly, so that a headless comrade might have been behind him, hugging him; and he wore no scarf or muffler despite the severity of the weather, but only a white-spotted red cotton handkerchief knotted about his brawny neck, with its ends hanging over his blue ticking shirt and ending in his moleskin vest. Decidedly Mackilliveray was proper tough, Stephen decided. And he was glad, your true Rover being a scorner of the elements.

The watchman came clinking out of his cave with two cups and a tin mug, a bag of brown sugar, a great square block of currant-cake wrapped in a sheet of newspaper, and an old table-knife to cut it with, which he wiped upon his sleeve. He dispensed cake in thick wedges, with liberally sweetened coffee to every one, including Stephen, who gratefully drank his portion from a jam-pot, chipped but clean. No one spoke during the repast, and the coffee-pot had yielded up its final drops, when, spurred by a sudden inspiration, the giver of the feast, shaking up the sugar and grounds in his mug, proposed a toast to the company.

“'Ear-'ear!” applauded the watchman's mate.

“This being Christmas Eve,” said the watchman, “and us gathered 'ere in a friendly way, though it has come about by chance-like, I'll take it on me to perpose wot you might call a Seasonable Sentiment.”

“'Ear-'ear!” acclaimed the watchman's mate.

“Anker!” cried Stephen, who had heard toasts given at ‘The Pure Drop.’

“Shove on!” growled Mackilliveray, on whose surliness the inward exhibition of coffee and currant-cake seemed to have had no mollifying influence.

“Here's to our Noble Selves!” proposed the watchman, shaking up the grounds and sugar; “May the next Christ-

mas Eve, when it comes round, find us no Worse off than we are now, and wi' Better things set down to our account than stands wrote in the Book this day."

"'Ear!" acclaimed the crony, without enthusiasm.

"Anker!" cried Stephen, loyally, pounding the empty jam-pot upon the frozen ground.

"Jigger me if I call that a toast," complained Mackilliveray sulkily. "Burn my eyes if a toast of that natur' is worth washin' down wi' catlap! Could I be worse off than I am now? No, by the great Lord Harry! Wouldn' I be a happier man to-day, if I'd bin worse than I be?" With an angry gesture of his great rough hands he tossed the liquid left in his cup upon the glowing coals of the brazier, which sent out clouds of cindery steam full in the face of the speaker, and hissed as though he had been no less than the popular villain of a play.

"There, there. Ye don't mean that, ye know," said the watchman pacifically. "Gi' me the cups to pack away in my old missus's basket, and get inside, and have your sleep. I'll not disturb ye more. I'm for a nap myself, by way o' speakin'."

"I've told ye as I can't sleep. Why d'ye shake yer cussed old 'ead, much as to ask wot prewents me? Why don't I—as your mate here said while back?—why don't I get me an onwed lass, a willin', likely mawther—or take on wi' another Road Gang, and go for a change up North? Work's plentiful, and chaps as strong as me don't grow on every blackberry-bush. That bein' allowed, why the Devil don't I go? The answer's fur the axin'. Fur that a woman holds me, an' wonnot let me free o' her!" said Mackilliveray.

"You've told me 'fore my mate Callis here"—the watchman jerked his ear towards his friend—"as how she won't let go o' ye. But you've told me times an' agin' 'fore now—as how when you follered of her up,—she'd have nowt to do wi' ye!"

"Well, burn me if I didna' tell you true. I did foller her up, an' she wouldn' have nort to do wi' me."

"My blessed days!" The watchman spat into the ashes underneath the brazier. "What sort of a life is it for a grown man, caterwauling after a married woman? 'No,'—

she says, and a fool could tell that once 'No' from her means 'Never!' Then—her answer bein' such, why doan't ye up an' quit?"

Mackilliveray thrust out his jaw and stared angrily at the smoking fire. An ugly pallor had usurped the florid colour on his bulldog countenance.

"A man"—the whites of his pale light eyes were reddened in an ugly fashion, and the corded muscles of his bull-neck and the bared arms folded over his chest stood out in swollen knots—"a man as had set his all on 'Ay,' so that Life meant nort wi'out it,—might be drove into takin' 'No' fur 'Ay,' come the chance fur which that man 'ud swing."

"Tut-tut!" The watchman made the noise by which a nurse rebukes the naughtiness of an infant. "That sort o' talk's no good at all. 'Tis not fur decent men, but crimmer-nals. Besides, the woman can use her hands better than some backed fighters in th' Ring. She'd kill you, or she'd kill herself, before she'd let you come a-nigh her. Tut-tut! Lucky there's none but my mate and me to hear you talk that Newgit way. If you'd be her friend—and your own friend too, leave her be, an' quit the neighbourhood."

"Leave her be," said Mackilliveray, thrusting his jaw still further out, and savagely scowling. "Leave her with the soaking sot that ill-uses her now, and'll one day up an' murder her. Burn my eyes, if he hev'n't bragged up to 'The Pure Drop' times an' again o' how he gin it her! Hanna I heerd him wi' these ears? Ten—twenty times I have, till I wur fain to twist his neck, fur the misgot tyke he be!"

"Well, if he do misuse the woman, she can fend for herself," said the watchman. "*He'd* be a rotten stick in her grip—that drinkin' feller would."

Stephen was reminded of the Enemy, and sickened at the thought of him. And then he jumped—meeting across the fire Mackilliveray's bloodshot stare.

"Why, jigger my soul and burn my eyes if that's not Braby's boy!" said Mackilliveray, savagely intensifying the red-veined stare.

"Boy," echoed the watchman, who, it seemed, had forgotten that Stephen was present. "Sure-ly there were a boy. Ah, theer he be. You boy, what be your name, an'

where do you live to? Speak up, and mind you tells the truth."

"My name be Stephen Braby, an' I live up to th' Tolley Farm wheatacres. In Mrs. Parmint's cottage, that's Grower Grundall's now."

Stephen was not afraid of the watchman, who had treated him hospitably, though he cherished grave doubts of Mackilliveray, and shrank from the other man.

"Spoke like a warrior bold," said the watchman approvingly. "And where was you a-going so early in th' day?"

"To London, please," returned Stephen, thrilling deliciously, "if so be's I could git a lift on a trolley goin' up to the Works."

"And how d'ye mean to pay fur th' lift?" growled Mackilliveray, scowling at him.

"My mother she giv' me a shillin'——" began Stephen, and stopped there.

"Show it here!" said Mackilliveray with really ferocious energy. Adding as Stephen rummaged in a pocket of the old cord breeches, and presently displayed the coin in a reluctant palm: "Pass it over. Put it in my hand. Burn my eyes and jigger me! D'ye think I'm goin' to rob ye? Sithy now, young narbor," as Stephen unwillingly parted, "this heer shillin' o' yourn be a bad 'un. I'll gi' ye a good 'un in exchange."

"My mother give me that there, an' I knows it bain't a bad 'un," declared Stephen stoutly, though his heart was in his boots.

"So you says," growled Mackilliveray, feigning to bite the coin. "Sithy, I'll gi' ye another bob, an' a tanner instead o' this shillin'. Fur I've got a fancy to hev it fur a keepsake, d'ye see? Woolst strike han's on th' bargain an' take th' brass, an' what's more, a lift as fur as Lunnun? Say th' word, narbor, an' ye shall go in th' tender long o' me."

"I call that fair and more than," said the watchman's crony admiringly.

"It depends," said the watchman cautiously, "on what the boy decides. What do you say, boy? Will you take eighteenpence and a lift on the road to London in exchange for this here coin as this mate o' mine fancies so?"

Beset with doubts as to the good he should reap from the suggested bargain, Stephen nodded with the tears in his eyes, and the navvy tossed over the eighteenpence, saying that he would now take the watchman's advice and try for another snooze.

Stephen would have liked to run away when the impounder of his shilling rose up and plunged back into the shelter, but that the watchman threw a shovelful of coals upon the fire, and that the frosty fog seemed denser and more chill. Besides, his own eyes were closing, in spite of his resistance, and even as the watchman, with a bad pretence at roughness, threw a ragged horse-rug over him, he coiled down near the brazier and fell fast asleep.

5

When Stephen wakened and sat up, rubbing his eyes open, the tips of his eyelashes were curiously stiff, and the edges of the sack beneath him, the old horse-rug that had covered him, the mounds about and the tarpaulins protecting the pile of barrows and forming the watchman's shelter, were thickly coated with snow-white, glittering frost. He got to his feet, and stamped about to warm those numbed extremities, and climbing a heap of sparkling sand, saw the Sun, all fiery crimson, rise through the fogs that hid Edmonton Marshes, and hugged himself because he was alive in such a glorious world.

The fear and anger of overnight were no longer vivid in his memory, and his doubts of Mackilliveray melted like the hoar-frost where the sun-rays shone most bright. Even when that dour personage came swearing out of the shelter on the heels of its legitimate owner, whose crony had unaccountably vanished, Stephen was ready to credit him with the possession of an amiable nature, soured by the inexplicable ill-usage of the woman who hadn't a name.

They broke their fast on a hunch of bread-and-dripping, and tea made in the coffee-pot, which tasted curiously, and when six o'clock struck from Tolleymead Church tower, and everything eatable had vanished, Mackilliveray borrowed

a dingy towel and a bit of yellow soap from the watchman, drew water in a bucket from a standpipe near, and went in for what he called a sloosh.

Having washed in the middle of the previous night, Stephen felt no desire to imitate him, but watched the hulking fellow as he stripped to the waist, and dipped and scoured and rinsed.

When he had finished using the dingy towel as a combined sponge and wash-rag and dried himself on his ticking shirt and put it on again, he cleaned his teeth by applying with his thumb a pinch of powdered brick-dust; rinsed his mouth, arranged his bright red hair with a couple of inches of broken comb produced from his waistcoat pocket; and resuming his waistcoat and retying his neckerchief, assumed his pilot-coat, topped himself with a fur cap, and dragging a bundle of oilskins and tools and a rush-basket from the shelter, inquired of its hospitable owner how much there was to pay.

"Fur I's bided here for a full week past, yettin' an' drinkin' o' your victuals," said Mackilliveray, "an' sleepin' in your bunk when sleep wur to be got. Will six and sixpence do?"

"'Tis too much," protested the watchman. "Call it four bob an' done with it. *I'm* satisfied, so long as you be."

"Keep the 'arf-bull fur some good advice o' yours, an' your mate's," said Mackilliveray, in his surly way, and motioning the proffered money back. "Which advice I be a-going to take before th' day be older."

"Bean't you a-going to work th' half-day?" asked the watchman curiously.

"No!" returned Mackilliveray. "Burn me if I be!"

As he said this, stamping his heavy nailed boot on the ground, so that sparks flew up from the contact, and lowering his red head and glared out of his red-veined eyes, puffing clouds of frosty breath out of his nostrils, he was more like an angry bull than a man, to Stephen's revolted mind. Now he went on, in his thick deep voice:

"My mind's made up to clear out o' this place before she drives me wuddy. Sithy!—when th' men cooms down th' line, I'm going back in th' truck. An' I'll speak to th'

Superintendent of th' Branch Line Works an' git transferred up North'ard. An' theer I'll stay. Onless she tolls me back——"

"How would a woman toll ye back as never looks nor speaks to ye?"

"Onless I git tolled back-along by the thought of her hate an' scorn o' me." Mackilliveray's pale eyes were now crimson in the whites, and he emphasized his words by pounding downward blows, as though he held a rammer in his clenched right hand, or were wielding a pile-driver's maul. "And if I be——" He struck again.

"But ye won't be," said the watchman. "No, boy, no! Put yer copper up." For Stephen had twitched at his oil-skin cape, and slipped a penny in his hand. "If I take from this mate for what he've had, theer's nothin' to pay fer you, boy."

An engine whistled, and round the bend of the line came a little locomotive, pulling a tender and a truck crammed full of lusty pilot-coated men. They began to spill out all over the line before the engine came to a standstill, calling out in gruff or cheery tones to the watchman and their mate:

"How goes it, wi' you, Mack, old lad? What weather did ye make last night, mate?"

To these and other greetings Mackilliveray deigned no reply. He had clambered to the top of a mound of soil, and was staring under his levelled hand, steadily towards the wheatacres. He plucked off his cap and swung it in his great hand as though he took leave of some one, and the gesture, though it was clumsy enough, had a certain dignity.

Then he came lumbering down, and returned his comrades' salutations; and exchanged a rough grip of the hand with some, as though he were saying good-bye. And then he went over to the engine, and, leaning on its rusty flank as though it had been a pony, exchanged some words in an undertone with the smutty driver in the cab. Then he glanced round at Stephen, and nodded at the truck significantly; and Stephen grabbed his bundle and joined him with a thumping heart.

"No load to deliver 'fore Toosday along o' the holidays. Goin' to back her back straightways," he heard from the

smutty man. "When the men knocks orf at twelve o'clock, they'll run theirselves up in the trolley. Can't have no bis'ness breakin' in on my Christmiss 'oliday. Could you, Alf?"

Alf, who was an even smuttier man, grunted:

"Not by no means!" And the little engine confirmed him by snorting steam and cinders, and butting the tender violently backwards against the truck. Then Mackilliveray heaved his pack into the truck, and swung his great body after, and Stephen, with his little bundle, clambered after him.

And then—with a terrific triple bump and a shriek from the little engine—they were off, and Tolleymead was sliding away, and Stephen's eyes were wet. For never before in his twelve years of life had he parted from his Master-piece. . . .

"What's that theer water on yer face?" demanded Mackilliveray.

"Nothin,' sir," said Stephen, smearing his sleeve across his eyes, and swallowing, "but that I some'ow bin an' got a cinder in me eye."

"If I thowt as I'd took fur company a Sniveller," said Mackilliveray, "jigger me but I'd take an' heave him out fur Ballast on th' line. You got a Father, han't yer? Speak up, young narbor!"

Stephen timidly owned to possessing the relative named.

"An' likeways you got a Mother?" Mackilliveray was sitting on the floor of the truck, well out of the smoke and cinders, lolling back against his bundle, with his long legs at full stretch. "Would she be sorry to lose ye?" he asked, filling a blackened clay pipe with chopped-up twist tobacco.

Stephen said with a full heart: "Yes, sir, I reckon she would!"

"Then if you hanna' better wits than to sit as I see you on th' truck-ledge, ye'll topple out an' mash yer skull, an' be carried home to her dead! What business d'ye foller?" inquired Mackilliveray, smoking.

"I tends to plough," began Stephen, "an' when there bain't no ploughin', I wids, or scares th' birds."

He had squatted down obediently on the floor of the

truck, in the corner most remote from his companion, of whom his overnight's distrust had vividly revived.

"So then you got no work jus' now?" asked Mackilliveray, smoking and spitting.

"No, sir."

"What mought yer Father do fur a livin', young narbor? Hay?"

"Nothin,' sir."

Mackilliveray rumbled deep in his throat, and if the sound meant laughter, the expression on his sullen face was not to correspond.

"Then yer Mother's workin' fur ye all?"

"Yes, sir," said innocent Stephen, "up to the Tolley Hall Dairy Farm most days in th' week. Though she"—he felt as though the navvy's heavy stare dragged the answer out of him—"though she ain't workin' at the Dairy now."

"She's lost her job—eh?"

Something rumbled deep in Mackilliveray's throat, and his red-veined, light eyes glittered. They were the colour of pale flint, or bottle-glass of yellowish-brown.

"Lost her job at th' Dairy, d'ye say?"

Stephen nodded assentingly.

"Had words wi' th' missus?" asked Mackilliveray, "or summat like to that?"

"Th' mistress she were wapsey, sir." Stephen was piecing odd scraps of talk, overheard at times, together, conscious, even as he pieced. that to piece and tell was wrong. "I dunno why!"

"I'll tell ye! . . ." The rumbling sound in Mackilliveray's throat came again. "'Twere like this. Th' old mawther she spited of the young one, along o' the Man as was waitin' outside the cowyard gate. The Man as stud theer in th' mornin' when th' cows they be druv' to th' milk-sheds. An' the Man as stud theer in th' evenin'; when they drives of 'em in agen. Th' old mawther she fared to be jealous along o' that Man, as I reckins. Her time be gon' past fur any chap to dangle an' gawp at she."

He rumbled deep in his throat again and relapsed into silence; nor did he aught but smoke and spit from then until the journey's end. Which came, despite Stephen's

acute distaste for Mackilliveray's conversation and company, before the boy had had enough of his first journey by rail.

It drew near half-past six o'clock as they joggled towards Finchley, leaving strings of market-gardeners' carts piled high with crates of mistletoe and scarlet-berried holly, and bundles of ivy and little firs for Christmas trees, and great waggons laden with vegetables, and covered vans carrying under their tilts boxes of fruits and flowers, lumbering behind on the great North Road beside which the truck-line ran.

And now the little rusty engine was butting them into Finchley, the Tolley Brook, to Stephen's surprise, having attended them all the way. And the wild conglomeration of raw ballast-track and rusty rail, upheaved Middlesex clay and building-stuff, ended in the smug neatness of Finchley Station and the well-ordered traffic of the Edgware Branch Line.

There was a raw new building of yellow brick roughly enclosed within a whitewashed hoarding, advertising itself by a big painted board as the Head Office of the New Railway Works. And gangs of men in fur caps, pilot-coats, and moleskins were gathered outside the hoarding, staring at the bills and coloured posters that relieved its deadly ugliness, or pouring in and out of a gateway that stood open in the whitewashed fence.

The bumpy track ended near this gate in a rusty pair of buffers, against which the rusty little engine spitefully bumped the truck. Having done this, it was uncoupled, and after considerable shunting, brought up in the shadow of a water-tank elevated on four wooden legs.

"Wheer did ye say ye was a-going—eh, young narbor?"

Stephen, in the act of scrambling down, was arrested by a heavy hand that gripped him by the shoulder, and thus questioned by Mackilliveray, who already stood upon the track. He answered:

"To Cov'n Garden Markit, sir."

"'Tis a fairish stretch for longer legs than yourn, young narbor." Again came that queer rumbling deep in Mackilliveray's throat. "Were yer Mother to meet ye theer?"

“No, sir,” said Stephen.

“Can ye mind ye o’ summat to say to her wheniver you sees her next?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Then let you tell her this from me.” The hand weighed heavy as iron. “The Man as stood nigh th’ cowyard gate have gone erway fur good. D’ye mind me? ‘Gone away fur good!’ ” . . .

Stephen nodded, and the crushing weight was lifted, and Mackilliveray passed through the open gate and was swallowed in a crowd of men.

6

To get back to the Great North Road again and strike out for Highgate was what Stephen had settled in his mind would be the thing to do. For, following the vans and waggons and carts and barrows drawn by ponies and donkeys, all bound for Covent Garden Market (or so it seemed to Stephen)—following these, you were bound in the end to reach the longed-for bourne.

Trains were quick things to take you there, in a joggly and cinderous fashion, but Stephen’s predilections leaned in the direction of a Van. In a grower’s Van or tilted Market-waggon you were boxed up delightfully with lovely smells about you—or smells, which if not quite lovely, were of green and growing things. There were chains hanging to tail-boards too, by which, after a fashion, a boy following behind might occasionally get a lift. So Stephen headed for the Great North Road, which was reached by a long lane deep in mud of a clayey and adhesive sort, and a short lane deeper still in mud of gruel-like consistency; and as he came out upon it, there were the waggons and vans and carts rolling along as doggedly, as though in eighteen hours more it wouldn’t be Christmas Day.

“Hi! You, boy! Pick up that there!”

The shout was meant for Stephen. The driver of an untilted van piled with crates of holly and mistletoe, had dropped his oilskin cape in the road as his horses trotted by.

“Why, here’s a face from Tolleymead, or I’m a Dutchman!” said the driver, recognized by Stephen as a carter who had worked for the Tolley Hall farmer, and had gone away to better himself a year or two ago: “An’ how come you here, young Stevey-wag, and where be ye bound for?”

‘Wag’ was a common prefix to boys’ Christian names in Tolleymead. You heard ‘Charley-wag’ and ‘Billy-wag’ and ‘Johnny-wag’ and ‘Dicky-wag’ apostrophized a dozen times in the course of a village stroll.

“Goin’ up to have a look at the Market all decked and gay for Christmas?” the round-faced man commented when Stephen had replied. “But you’ll lose the best on it, travellin’ your way. For even wi’ my lightish load and my two good beasts to draw it, I shan’t be there myself by time the eight-o’clock bell rings. But then, you see, young cocky-wax”—the driver winked a moist eye pleasantly at Stephen—“I got in at four with the chicer stuff, an’ this is my second load. What d’ye say? Give me thruppence for a lift? Well, I don’t mind doing it for nothing, if you’ll perch yourself at the back o’ the van—an’ put up wi’ a few pricks. Them London boys are tigers after the holly an’ mistletoe, an’ it’ll be grab and bolt, grab and bolt,—once we gits past Highgate—all the way from Junction Road, to Wellin’ton Street, *I* lay! Break yourself a fair-sized stick and let ’em have it on the knuckles. Up with you behind. Are you stiddy there? Then gee up, old Bess and Joe!”

The sun climbed higher, and the frosty fog became less dense and woolly, and postmen bending under bags made appearance on the slippery roads—performing fantasias of double-knocks, dropping letters into areas, and delivering parcels to excited maids in a jocular and seasonable way. Many of the parcels had come undone, and the babies’ bonnets and muffedettes and smoking-caps and slippers and albums and tea-cosies that tumbled out of them were Christmas presents, or Stephen was deceived.

Savoury smells of breakfast now made his mouth water, and whiffs of steaming mixtures, such as purl and flip and dog’s nose, hot rum-and-milk, and so forth, issued from the swing-doors of public-houses when customers passed in and out.

As regards the tigerish appetite of London boys for holly, the driver of the crate-van had not exaggerated in the least. Long before they had left the Archway Road and the Junction Road and were jolting over the Kentish Town and Camden Town cobblestones, the sport of rapping knuckles of varying shades of griminess had lost its early zest, and Stephen was fain to use the holly-stick for the warding off of well-aimed missiles, such as dead rats and kittens, rotten oranges, old shoes and clinkers; and cabbage-stalks culled from ash-boxes ranged along the kerbs. Gangs of juvenile brigands wrought to frenzy by frustrated efforts, ignoring spoil more easily won, hung upon the back of the van, attending its progress through the thick of the crowded traffic of North London, harassing with yells and whoops of shrill derision the lone defender perched among the crates at its rear.

Leaving these marauding bands behind, only to be again boarded and assailed by the audacious freebooters of yet another neighbourhood, Stephen (whose sufferings had been much increased by the tendency of the carter to comply with malicious exhortations to Whip Behind) began to have misgivings (I imagine for the first time) as to the desirability of Rovers and Freebooters. By the time the van reached Endell Street, he was disillusioned for life. But now, being wedged in a solid jam of carts and waggons (some of great size and drawn by great horses, in comparison with whose proportions ponies seemed small as donkeys and the donkeys no bigger than big dogs), and all these vehicles being laden with the produce of country Market Gardens, young Braby's individual sufferings were rendered less poignant by the fact of there being not only more Policemen there to put a check on stealing, but a wider and more varied choice of things to steal. For under the very noses of the big men in blue great-coats, with silver-badged helmets, slinking men, furtive-eyed and dressed in tattered garments, women with squashed pads on their heads that may once have been bonnets and shawls of the colour and consistency of decayed cabbage-leaves, dodged under the noses and bellies of the animals to pilfer from the baskets or rob the crates and hampers piled up in the vans.

Youths of sharp, pallid countenance, supple and nimble as monkeys, displayed themselves, despite their years, as masters in the art of theft. And children of both sexes, all ages, and every type of viciousness, improved the murky morning hour by cadging and pilfering, safeguarded from the policeman's charge of begging or vagrancy by a halfpenny box of matches or a couple of leather bootlaces, or a farthing cake of blacking gripped in a dirty hand.

7

Stephen's glowing anticipations of the beauty and splendour of London had not been realized up to now. Such shops as they had passed upon the road had looked dingy and had their blinds down. Such buildings as were of any size had been distinguished by ugliness.

An occasional Royal Mail van, or the bright vermilion-painted carts of a well-known firm of newsvendors, made bright patches on the drabness, as they rattled behind their bony beasts over the cobblestones. But these were the only signs upon the streets that this was Stephen's London. The newspaper boys were rending the air with shrieks of 'Morning Paper,' and the broadsheets displayed outside stationers' shops, and at corners where omnibuses halted, announced in jet-black capitals the Leading Intelligence of the Day.

Take a dip or so with Stephen (who has spelt out *Robinson Crusoe* and the names and descriptions of flowers from the *Garden Lovers' Manual*, and a chapter or two from the New Testament as well as the *Lives of the Sea Rovers*) into the Day's Intelligence:

H.R.H. the Prince of Wales Continued to make Progress towards Convalescence. Bulletins would now be posted at Marlborough House but Twice in the Twenty-four Hours. The Annual Distribution of Christmas Meat and Gifts to the Royal Cottagers and Dependents would be made To-day at Twelve o'clock on the Sandringham Estate. The Thirty-Five-Thousand Two-Hundred and Seventy-Two Paupers contained within the walls of the Metropolitan Workhouses were to be regaled on Christmas Day with

Prime Roast Beef, Plum Pudding, Beer, Fruit, Cake and other Seasonable Luxuries, the Aged being in addition supplied with Pipes, Tobacco and Snuff. And as the Bill for Putting Down Assassination in Ireland had been Found Too Feeble, Parliamentary Measures would be Taken, on the Re-assembling of Lords and Commons, to Crush for Ever the Hydra of Political Crime.

This Christmas found—so the broadsheets said—France in a Condition of Tranquillity, though Fresh Disturbances were Apprehended at a Not Distant Date. Building Operations were being briskly carried out by Architects, Engineers and Builders In Repair of the Wreckage brought about in the War of the Previous Year. Though the German Artillery (it was pointed out) had done Remarkably Little Damage, compared with the Frightful Havoc wrought by Red Republican Troops; not to mention the Breaches the City of Paris had Sustained under the Bombardment carried out in the previous April by the Versailles Government, or the Wanton Pillage and Destruction of Public and Private Buildings during the Days of the Commune, and the Ruin wrought in the Final Struggle between Militarists and Insurgents for the Possession of the Capital.

With the Revision of the Holy Bible (portions of the Gospels may have been found as much too strong in their denunciation of Hypocrisy as the Government Measures for the repression of Assassination in Erin's Isle had been found too weak)—with the Taking of the Census, and some references to the Tichborne Case, which had reached its Seventieth Hearing without a Reply to the Claimant—the broadsheets dribbled into silence, as the holly-van rolled on.

There had been, as they bumped out of Gower Street, a double-barrelled glimpse right and left down a really splendid thoroughfare, all shops and shops and shops again, which tickled Stephen's eyes. But now, as the van left Endell Street, and barged its way through the solid jam of traffic in Long Acre, blocked with coster-barrows and donkey-carts loaded with holly and mistletoe—and turned into a narrowish street up which more of these were strain-

ing,—a street with a shop at the left-hand corner (with shining brazen helmets and a Fire Engine in its window), a mass of gloomy buildings rose upon the right and a sable-suited Portico adorned with Corinthian columns and grimy-featured statues rose to a Pediment of allegorical design, topped by more Muses and other classical wild-fowl, lost to Stephen's ignorance in the frosty December fog, which was yellow now and specked with blacks, and strongly flavoured with orange-peel, decayed green vegetable matter, sewage, escaping gas, fried fish, roast chestnuts, and violets.

And now with wonder Stephen saw suspended against the front of the Portico—before which the up-current from the Strand and Covent Garden Market, meeting the down-currents from Endell Street, Long Acre and the by-streets, resulted in a blockage that threatened to be permanent—two colossal posters of rainbow hues. One announcing in six-inch capitals, that Under the Patronage of Royalty, and the Nobility and Gentry of Great Britain, Mr. Harris (father of the Impresario of our recollection) would on Monday, December the 26th (Boxing Day Night), at 7 p.m. punctually, have the honour of Producing his Annual Pantomime.

The second poster depicted (nearly life-size too) BLUE-BEARD, the tyrant Bashaw of Oriental fame, to Be Represented by the Great Macdermott (Specially Engaged for the Christmas Season), Supported by MONS. DELIVANTI (another of your special engagements) in the rôle of the Learned Monkey, ORANGATANGABUSKIBABOONETTA, and the Brilliant *Comédienne*, Singer and Dancer, MISS MILLIE MARTINO,—as FATIMA. Those Talented Burlesque Histriions, The Brothers Bogson, were to be seen in the Characters of Mr. and Mrs. Shacabac. Mrs. Merridew as 'Sister Anne' and the Talented Kerli Kale Family as Bluebeard's White Elephant and Fatima's Arabian Courser, followed on the bill. With a final announcement that the Costumes (Executed by Madame Auguste) would be of Unparalleled Splendour and the Illuminations Absolutely Regardless of Expense.

The HARLEQUINADE would include Mr. A. Forrest (as

Clown). Mons. Paulo (Pantaloon) and Mlle. Mercedes (from the Leading Continental Theatres) as Columbine. Opening Music selected and Composed by Mr. Betjemann. Choruses by the Spieglerpiffel Glee, Catch and Cantata Choir. Dances arranged by Mons. Pasbas, and Scenery (absolutely Unlimited as to Cost and Brilliancy) by Messrs. Dayes, Caney and Perkins. Wigs by Fox. Properties and Accessories by Bax and Twillery. Free List absolutely closed.—God Save the Queen.

“My golly!” gasped Stephen Braby, with circular blue eyes of wonder, “that there place must be!—I do believe it is!——”

“Cov’n Garden Theayter,” said a thickish voice beside him, and Stephen met the laughing glance of a girl some years his senior, with a round, pale face under a clipped straight fringe overhanging bright black eyes.

She sat perched on the tail-board of the van, now immovable in the pack of Bow Street. A shabbily dressed but not ragged girl, who might have been thirteen. She had no business to be there, dangling her legs as coolly as though the van belonged to her; and Stephen meant to tell her so, but she spoke again as he opened his mouth, and he shut it up quick.

“Cov’n Garden Theayter. The ’ouse where they ’as the Pantomime. Ain’t you not never seen it, you rummy little cove?”

“No, Miss,” said Stephen wistfully, looking back at the poster, for the van was beginning to move again.

“Fancy you calling of me Miss. In this ’ere kind o’ toggery. Though if you seed me Sundays it might seem more nat’ral-like. You oughter see me Sundays. I’m a swell then—I am! Lend me that stick for ’arf a mo’.” Her tone changed to truculence as she snatched Stephen’s holly cudgel. “You Chinney, if you gits up ’ere I’ll poke yer ugly eye out. An’ then you’ll have to git abart wif a dog an’ a tin can.”

Their would-be fellow-passenger on the tail of the van was a short young coster with side-locks, a leather-peaked cloth cap, and a black patch over one eye. Threatened by the young lady with the stick, he fell back grinning, and

vanished amongst the moving legs of the horses and ponies and donkeys and the rolling wheels of the vans and carts and barrows and trucks that were slipping and sliding over the cabbage-leaves and orange-peels that covered the macadamized pavement of Bow Street at this point.

"My! didn't yer stare just now, when you turned yer 'ead and see me," continued the assured young lady, settling her shawl. "'Ad yer mouth open, so you 'ad—wide enough to swaller Bluebeard, wiv 'is Monkey an' wives an' all the lot. Jest so you 'ave it now."

They had passed a great glass-roofed building and a row of shops and cheap restaurants and crossed a shortish thoroughfare, congested with greengrocers' carts, costermongers' barrows standing backed against the kerbstones, and such enormous market vans, heavily built, hoisted on high springs, and drawn by giant horses, as Stephen Braby had never seen in all his life before.

In proportion with the size of the vehicles (which blocked the middle of the street and were nearly all empty)—and the animals that drew them, were the robust men who drove; ruddy of cheek and bushily whiskered, their giant limbs and bodies clad in panoply of corduroy. They shouted in ogreish voices and laughed like rattling thunder, and every man had an invoice-book sticking out of one of his pockets, and was wiping his face with a blue-speckled or red cotton pocket handkerchief; and with as much need to wipe it, too, as though it were July. And not a man but was drinking beer, or calling for beer,—which was brought him by potmen in white aprons with rolled-up shirt-sleeves, and badged porters in long-sleeved waistcoats with aprons of green baize. Beyond were some squat buildings surrounded by a crowd of people, and down a long vista beyond them were brilliant flowers and fruits. Only a glimpse, but Stephen's eyes glittered as they caught it, and Stephen's heart thumped heavily behind the hunkumed smock.

"Ain't—ain't that there place Coven' Garden Flower Market?"

"Them as likes to call the Arcade the Markit can if they wants, but we knows better nor that." She sniffed contemptuously, and went on in the thick catarrhal accents

of the London coster: "Nah, stoopid! That's the Fruit Harcade. Wot a jolly mug you har. There's two Flower Shops each end of the Harcade, but the Flower Markit's outside it. Don't you twig the stands under the Pyassas each side, an' the flares lightin' the stalls? Well, they runs like that right along each side of a square, 'bout the Harcade Buildin's, an' outside the Church an' the Portico 'Otel. . . . Make ready to git down!"

"What for?" asked Stephen rather stupidly. The roll of traffic and the roar of voices made him feel heavy in the head.

"Why, becos' this here wan ain't goin' to stop 'ere in Russell Street. Turn up along Tavistock Street it will,—an' I'm gittin' down myself. Look at Mr. Buckley jest inside the Harcade, smokin' 'is cigar as usual. You never sees Mr. Buckley wivout 'is cigar. . . ."

"Who be Mr. Buckley?" Stephen queried.

"Ain't you never 'eard of Buckley? . . ." Buckley might have been the Emperor of all the fabled Russias, so full of awe and reverence was this little Cockney's tone. "'Olesale Fruit an' Potato Importer? Him of the Stores in Flora Street. Wherever does yer come from, wiv yer night-shirt over yer cloes?"

"It ain't no nightshirt. It be a smock," returned the wearer of the vilified garment. "We fares to field in such-like where I lives to, in Hertfordshire."

"We puts 'em on to go to bed—which I means the men an' boys does, when they can afford 'em that is—but mostly they goes wivout. You can see 'em dryin' in back-yards an' hangin' out o' winders. There's Mr. Buckley agin! . . . 'Tain't no use to 'oller. 'E's gone down the Harcade 'e 'as, to speak to Mr. James. Yer'll see two stands tother end of the Harcade, right-'and side o' the Harchway, an' a board with 'Buckley Brothers' over a gas-flare. An' Buckley Brothers is Mr. James an' Mr. John, which is sons to Mr. Buckley. Growers they are at Sidcup, an' they holds a sight of ground. An' Little Lou Buckley she's Mr. Buckley's grandchild. Mr. James is 'er farver. . . . Watch now. I'm a-goin' to jump!"

"Wait till she stops. You'll get hurted, Miss," said

Stephen anxiously, venturing to lay a timid hand upon her ragged sleeve.

“She won’t pull up ’ere wiv this load o’ Chrissmiss green-stuff. He’ll turn into Tavistock Street, he will, an’ take it round that way. I shan’t git ’urted, silly! I allus does like this ’ere.”

“Can I come wi’ you?”

“Try, an’ chance it!”

The black-eyed girl promptly jumped, diving under the pole of a two-horsed van behind them, and Stephen, stuffing his little bundle into the breast of his smock-frock, tumbled after the black-eyed girl, in the literal sense of the word.

* * * * *

“Hi, hi!”

“Hi, hi! HI!”

“Now then, stoopid! WHERE are you comin’ to?”

A shaggy hoof, heavily shod with new bright iron, came ponderously down on the greasy stones within three inches of Stephen’s ear. And iron-tyred wheels, ponderous and broad, were crashing all about him, and a forest of hairy equine legs penned and prisoned him round. And—a rough hand caught him by the scruff and hauled him out of peril; *minus* the one-tailed Scotch cap; with his hunkumed smock half over his head, and his great boots clattering on the stones.

“I’ve half a mind to run you in, you blundering young donkey,” said No. X. of A Division. “Now, what are you trying to do?”

“Git back me cap I bin an’ lost!” panted Stephen.

“’Much as your life is worth, young chap, to try at getting hold of it,” said the bearded, greatcoated constable, turning his broad blue back and stepping into the double stream of traffic as before. And the pale-faced, black-eyed girl, at whose heels Stephen had courted disaster, dodged grinning from under the body of a passing cart, dived under the nose of a coster’s shaggy pony, and now stood at Stephen’s side, offering him—what?

“My Crikey, ain’t it all of a slime! Reckon your mother could wash it. If you ’as a mother, that is. Don’t look as if you ’ad.”

"I got one safe enough, though!" asserted Stephen.

"Wot is she? Wot do she do for a livin', that's wot I means?"

"She works at the Tolley Hall Dairy Farm,—and she's a Masterpiece."

"Wot's that?"

"Go an' find out!"

"Yer a cheeky kid!"

"I be bigger nor you, an' you're nobbut a gal, neither!" retorted Stephen.

"If I am a gal," she flashed at him, "I'm trusted—that's wot I am! Look at this pyper I got in me 'and." She waved the yellow envelope. "This is a Business Cable for Mr. Buckley from France. Like enough with a Trade Order for a 'underd pound inside it!"

"I'll believe on ye right enough"—Stephen had an inspiration—"when I sees ye give it Buckley."

"Orl right, I'm gyme! But mind you don't bone nothing. Them Markit Inspectors is everywhere an' the Porters is paid to 'ave eyes. Foller 'ard be'ind me an' say wot ever I ses. Twig them grapes wot them men 'ave a-carryin' in the baskets. Smell the chrysampemums an' lilies, an' say ain't they just prime! An' don't bump into no porters' trolleys, an' mind where yer comin'. Down the Harcade is the shortest cut. An' when you gits outside of it, remember two stalls under a Nawning an' 'Buckley Brothers' painted on a board."

She dived into the thick of the murky crowd and vanished from Stephen's vision. He set his teeth and plunged after her with the vaguest views as to where.

Now from the mouth of the 'Harcade,' which served as the exit from the Market, streamed a procession of Cybeles with towers upon their heads. Vociferous, ample and Irish, nearly every one of them, wearing crossover shawls and coarse white aprons with licensed porters' badges (white letters on circular discs of black tin) dangling in front of their waists. On the top of their squashed bonnets were straw pads, and on top of the pads were baskets full of flower-pots with ferns or heaths in them, or little green shrubs with red berries, or bunches of cut

flowers. Violets turning the London air to rarest sweetness as they passed, and chrysanthemums of bronze and yellow and pink, exhaling their turpentiney smell. On either arm each lady bore a similar basketful, and seldom was the mouth of the bearer unadorned by a short and blackened clay.

“Mind your heads! Mind your toes!” every one seemed shouting: “Come on, you Mary, Norah, Kate! Wake up with that there stuff. . . .”

And the Norahs and Marys and Kates and the rest responded with such vigour, and Stephen, who had got mixed up with the ladies and the baskets, sustained so many bruises, bumps, scratches and abrasions, that he was fain to flatten against the wall and pant and gasp for breath.

But when the vans and carts of the greengrocers and fruiterers that had blocked the middle of Russell Street had backed up to the jaws of the Arcade and been filled and driven away, he tried again,—to encounter a rush of costers similarly laden, and when he made a third essay, was caught in the charge of a column of porters with note-books sticking out of side-pockets, pushing wheeled trucks piled high with frails and wicker hampers, and swept into the long crowded passage like a leaf before a storm.

And then he was in the packed Arcade, deafened by the roar of many wheels and the clamour of many voices, inhaling, with the acrid smell of sweated corduroy and fustian, rank tobacco, onions and beer,—the fragrance of fruit and flowers.

Through great glass windows either side, rare glimpses were vouchsafed him. Carnations and stephanotis, camellias and pelargoniums arranged in gilded baskets or massed in crystal bowls. . . . But when he would have lingered here, because their voices called him, he was thrust on, remorselessly, and now the flowers were gone. . . . And there were piles of luscious grapes, Muscat and blue-black Hamburgs, and pyramids of golden oranges and red-brown juicy pears. And here he would have stopped to gloat, but the human torrent rolled onwards under the flaring gas-jets, towards a foggy patch of day.

More glimpses of flowers on either hand—tall lilies and

red and pink camellias, mounds of mauve and purple cyclamen, and live fish of pure gold swimming in a big glass tank,—and he drew a breath of frosty fog as he passed beyond the Arcade extension, and knew that he stood where all his life he most had longed to be.

8

Covent Garden Market, the Hub of the Universe! Its cobblestones were under Stephen's feet and its breath was in his lungs, the sweet fragrance of innumerable flowers and plants, and homely fruits and vegetables triumphing over all the other smells of human and of brute.

“Stephen, Stephen, you have come! We're glad to see you, Stephen! Love us more than others love, and we will give you more.”

Thus the little voices that had sung and called to him since his childhood seemed all piping together in tones of elfin joy.

Before the Shadow had fallen on the cottage by the wheatacres Stephen had known happiness. But this was something rarer than he had tasted there. If some strong-winged Angel had caught him up, and soared with him beyond the spin of known and unknown planets and set him wide-eyed and wondering in the Courts of Heaven, I question whether his ecstasy might have exceeded this.

The stones were air beneath his feet. He moved forwards without knowing it, conscious of nothing but wonder, and a deep content with life. The sharp girl faded from his mind, and the board with 'Buckley Brothers' shone under its illuminating flare in vain for Stephen's eyes.

The gouty pillars and wide shallow steps of St. Paul's were obscured by pyramids of market-garden produce of every imaginable sort. So was the frontage of the 'Portico' Hotel. So also what once was Evans', concealed behind hoardings at this date, and in process of conversion into a Club. Wherever Stephen turned his eyes were flowers, flowers, flowers; cheap and common or costly, rich and rare. And they nodded to him, and called to him—though

their voices were so tiny, they drowned the roar of traffic from the streets close by, and the deafening din of the Strand.

Under the thicknesses of chilly fog that veiled the sky over London hung a mist of delicate pearliness that was not fog, but the extract of fog, doubly and triply refined. The twinkling gas-lamps under the colonnades and the flare-lights used by the stand-holders illumined the greyness from beneath, and threw Rembrandtesque lights and shadows on isolated figures or moving groups of buyers and market-folk.

But above the rows of flower-stands, and walls of frails and hampers, and shallows cunningly displaying their lavish store of blooms, the pearly mist was tinted, as though with their diverse fragrance the flowers gave forth the essence of their varied colour too. Thus over a magnificent display of coral-red camellias, the pearly fog was incarnadined with the hues of the setting sun. And tall multiflowered sheaves of lilies, all snowy-white and golden, or rosy, tipped with carmine; and banks of tawny or sulphur or brown or wine-coloured chrysanthemums and mounds of purple violets were canopied with a tapestry of diaphanous vapour, dyed with each blossom's peculiarly distinctive hue.

The crowd seemed solid, yet its constituents were never less than mobile, and its elements, though diverse, were continually changed. It roared and bawled and jabbered like the Zoological Gardens at feeding time, yet under carts pulled up by the kerb men and boys lay fast asleep. Their dogs, tied to the wheels, or loose, kept nippy watch on the light-fingered, and in this shouting, chaffering crowd of both sexes and all ages and conditions (every one out to profit, whether as seller or buyer), the crooks and sharps, the cadgers and prigs who are drones of the beehive of London were here, there and everywhere. . . .

The stall-holders had begun to sell at four o'clock that morning, when the wet newspapers came in from the Press with the Foreign Market news. Growers strolled about smoking cigars, booking deals and transacting business. At five o'clock, while the porters' loads of stuff were being

brought from the waggons, and the laden women whom Stephen had met were streaming *in*—not out—the Buyers and Brokers had hilariously rushed past the big policemen at the barriers, and (long before seven) the Hagglers had taken the Market by storm.

“’Day, Guv’nor!” A coster and his pal (both bespangled with pearly buttons) bear down upon James Buckley of Buckley Brothers, presiding over the nearest of his two stalls on the right outside the Arcade, his foreman, Groggard, an elderly man, doing business at the other; while Simkin, an athletic youth (whose relaxation is pugilism) divides his services equally between master and man; “Got my chrysanths, Guv’nor, and them wite ’yacinths? Yus, that’s my box! ’Ow do I know? Becos I sees my name on it. Ain’t my name on that box there, Elfred, wrote up clear?”

“Gosmejudge if it ain’t, Joe! Plain as a blushin’ Arfa-bet!” asseverates Elfred with professional brazenness.

“Now when I don’t even know your name——” begins James Buckley. Not often caught in this way, he has looked round for once, exactly as he was meant to. . . . “No, that’s not yours. This is yours, if you choose to make it so. Pay and take it, or leave it if you don’t like it,—it won’t go begging long.”

“Awright! I’ll take it, Guv’nor. ’Ere’s the I’m-so-funny. Don’t be ’ard on a pore cove.”

And the box of chrysanthemums changes hands, and the two costers move off with it together. But Elfred has hooked a second box at that fortuitous moment when the Guv’nor looked round. Discovering this, the Guv’nor exchanges a glance with his shirt-sleeved foreman. Its meaning is: “Had that time. Don’t tell the joke on me!”

“’Ow much the ’arf-dozen bunches these ’ere sweet vi’lets, Mister?” An elderly female of the flower-hawking class points to a heap of bunches, accidentally brushing some outliers with the end of her dirty shawl. Two go. She buys three, and moves on, feeling virtuous. Has she not paid good money? What can the man want more!

"Give us a flower, plyse, gen'leman. Gen'leman, do give us a flower. On'y one, gen'leman."

"Here you are then!" A yellow chrysanthemum becomes the property of a small and snuffly urchin. "Now hook it, d'ye hear? *Hook it!*" orders the Guv'nor, and the small boy moves away, wiping his nose on his jacket-sleeve. When he gets past the stall he runs. Another youth, who has hooked a small fern and a pot of Roman hyacinths has signalled. . . . And so the game goes on.

"Good morning! Any rope, twine, bast or fine wire for buttonholes, or bookays?" An emissary from a wholesale dealers in Bow Street, touting for trade orders.

"Paper, blue, white or pink! First, Second or Third quality." The agent of another trade firm lower down in Wellington Street. "By the ream, or packet, or bale of reams. Can we supply you?"

"Papers! Morning Papers, *Daily Telegraph, Daily News, Times, Standard, Weekly Courier.*"

A hoarse whisper, flavoured with gin. (Begging, like hawking, is prohibited within the precincts of the Market.)

"Pity the pore blind! Buy a light! Gord bless yer,—yer a gentleman!"

"Paregoric for the throat! 'Dr. Parker's Paregoric.'" A bottle produced from a coat-pocket is thrust under your nose.

"Dust combs (fine tooth). Catch 'em all alive O!" A card of specimens furtively displayed.

"Laces, penny a pair!"

"Studs, as good as gold!"

A card of brazen jewellery confidentially offered.

"Cough-drops and Lickerish!"

"Pencils! Pencil-cases, the Old Brummagem Firm!"

This man has his wares in the lining-band of his hat, and carries his hat in his hand.

"Take home an Animated Sausage for the Kids, or a real Dancing Injun!"

"The Dying Pig!" a piercing squeal of which Superintendents are oblivious. "More nateral nor life! O'ny thrup-pence!"

"Dubbin to keep the wet out o' yer boots," says somebody in a deep bass growl.

"Cashoos to please the ladies!"

"Any capth or shirth or panth or thockth, or ve'th, or necktieth? Thpethial low pritheth—firtth-clath goodth." A Hebrew with a compatriot openly staggering under a bale. "Or anything for the ladieth? Thtayth? . . . Thtockinth? . . . Themitheth? . . . Real lathe on 'em—on'y thee!"

"Coffee!" Cups of coffee boiling hot, baskets of cake full of raisins and ready-sliced in chunks, and wedges, piled-up plates of bread-and-butter, sandwiches, sausage-rolls, veal-pies temptingly set out on a wheeled stall with brightly-polished fittings, pushed through the Market by a well-dressed Jewish girl. There were plenty of coffee-stalls between the pillars of the Piazzas and all the eating-houses in the neighbourhood were driving a roaring trade. But Miss Addie with her toothsome wares is a feature of the Market, and an uncommonly pretty picture too. Quite as pretty and dressed as stylishly is Miss Essie, carrying a napkined tray with steaming cups of tea.

Stephen's single shilling burns in his pocket as these raven-haired, bright-eyed princesses sweep haughtily down on him. But such cates as these dainty ladies sell are not for muddy boys.

"Your coffee, Mr. Harris. And yours, Mr. Lowmore! I think you said coffee, didn't you, Mr. Veitchly? . . . This for you, Mr. Sanders, as per usual. Tea, Mr. Buckley? . . . I've not forgotten that you don't take sugar now. And you, Mr. James? Can't either of us tempt you?"

"Well, then, Miss Addie, I'll take a cup, and thank you, though I breakfasted at father's along with my little Lou."

A crowd of customers pressed round, and the steaming cups were handed. The brown veal-pies and the sandwiches and cake and bread-and-butter went off like so much savoury smoke. There were diamonds rivalling their wearer's eyes, in the dainty ears overshadowed by silken jet-black tresses, and diamond rings on the white hands that dispensed the hot drinks and cold eatables, and dropped the money taken in exchange into a natty waist-belt bag.

Those white hands, were you privileged to visit at the Highgate villa occupied by the parents of their lovely owners, (who were born in the little low-ceiled room over the coffee-shop in Russell Street)—those fair hands would dash you off the newest valse arranged for the piano by Coote or Arditi, or play you, with a master-touch acquired from a Parisian professor a Sonata by Beethoven or a Symphony of Gounod. And if their white teeth gleam and flash at jests rather broader than are commonly made in the presence of young ladies (who were expected to be innocent forty-one years ago), both of these are as good as gold, and pure as the flowers of the Market, in whose close neighbourhood they were born, and on whose ancient cobblestones they learned to toddle, to troll their hoops, to wheel their dolls' perambulators; and play the games that are popular with youth of every class and kind.

Miss Addie, bless her kindly heart,—(she married young Levi Manasseh, son and heir of the wealthy proprietor of five flourishing fried-fish-and-tater shops in Wellington Street, the Lower Strand and Red Lion Street, Holborn,—and has middle-aged married sons and daughters who move in Society, and whose children, I hope, have inherited their grandmother's good looks)—Addie, I say—(who had brought back from Paris a tender recollection of the blonde young Polish Professor who taught music at her boarding-school three mornings in the week throughout the term)—caught a glimpse of a pair of big blue eyes full of yearning, wistful admiration, and assumed to herself the sentiment created by her veal-pies and plum-cake.

“Did I hurt you, little boy? You shouldn't stand in the way so. Over your poor toes, did I go?”

The little boy shook a curly yellow head, and his eyes grew still more wistful. And the Polish piano-instructor had had blue eyes and frizzy yellow hair. . . .

“He looks hungry, doesn't he, Essie?” pursues the gentle Addie.

“Well, if you think so, give him a veal-pie.”

Essie is smiling at bashful Stephen over her tray of teacups, and he smiles back, showing square white teeth and crinkling his black-lashed blue eyes.

“And some bread-and-butter and a piece of cake.” Addie slips these good things into a paper-bag and as Stephen dizzily receives them: “A cup of coffee, too, you shall have. You look as if you wanted it! Don’t scald yourself by hurrying, now, we’re coming back this way. Set down the cup under the ledge of that stall when you’ve done. We’re sure to see it! And good-bye. Yes, he *did* thank me!” says Addie as an admirer hints that the country lout in the smock has got no manners. “Oh, Essie, if I do fall down and worship anything in Nature,—it’s a pair of blue eyes with black eyelashes like Jacobinski had!”

And the resplendent coffee-stall rolls away with the two black-eyed Princesses, and Stephen’s heart is full indeed,—but his mouth is fuller yet. The veal-pie and bread-and-butter have vanished and the coffee-cup is empty, when a remembered, thickish voice, says just behind his ear:

“My eye, young country customer, you ain’t pitching in, by ‘arf, har yer?” And his lady-acquaintance with the fringe regards him with wistful eyes.

“I’ve ett all the bread-an’-butter—an’ the pie—an’ I fared to keep th’ plum-cake to take home to my mother. But——” Stephen breaks the ambrosial hunch and offers the moiety.

“I don’t want none o’ your old cake,” says the girl. “Best keep it for yer mother.”

But she yields in the end, on condition that he shares the hunch of cake with her. And they revel in plummy sweetness, with the roar of the Market round them. . . .

“Boys gits more nice things than the gals,” says Becky, with her mouth full. She has told Stephen her Christian name and he has returned her confidence. “Yus, I found Mr. Buckley an’ give him the furrin wire. Wasn’t no good waiting for yer, I reckoned as yer’d lorst yerself. He came to the Market early,” she continues, through her munching, “along of Little Lou being here. Crissmiss Eve’s Little Lou’s birthday. Ain’t that a funny birthday?” She bolts the final raisin, and Stephen agrees that ‘tis rummy-like to be borned on such a day. “Born an’ not borned. . . . ‘Ow queer you talk. Ain’t you never seed Lou Buckley? She’s Mr. James Buckley’s little girl, an’ I reckon he’s fond o’ her! Called ‘is new rose ‘Lou Buckley’—what took the Society’s

Gold Medal. . . . Ain't you 'eard of the 'Orticultooral Society wot 'as the Rose Shows in Westminister?"

Yes, Stephen was dimly aware of the existence of that Institution, chiefly through listening to the conversation of Mr. Wix at 'The Pure Drop.'

"Orl right." Becky nodded her approbation. "You ain't sech a flat as yer looks, by 'arf. Now come an' see little Lou Buckley. You passed Buckley's stalls when you came out. Three up this side's the board. . . . 'Wot board?' Why the one I told yer of, where Buckley Brothers is wrote up. That's Mr. James, that tall thin man with the light brown beard an' the stoop. An' the shortish man wif the baldish 'ead (wot 'e's mopping wif 'is red silk 'ankerchief) that's Buckley Senior of the Stores in Flora Street near by. An' see!—There, in the middle o' the stall!—"

Stephen looked where the grimed hand pointed, and gasped ecstatically:

"A rose-tree in bloom o' Christmas-time! My stars! Ain't she nobbut lovely!" He had got 'nobbut' from Malvina, with her skin, and eyes, and curly hair of the colour of Canada wheat.

'She' was a standard in a sixteen-inch pot, beautiful, vigorous and thornless, with foliage of olive-green shaded copper here and there. A handsome tree, close-set with blooms of pink, with silvery touches. . . . A tree that might have grown in Eden when this grey old world was young.

"Wot are you a-wipin' your eyes for, Stoopid?" snapped Becky, sharply.

Stephen covered his weakness with a laugh as he smeared his sleeve over the eyes.

"You had me fair, I reckon, Miss," he stammered, blushing guiltily. "Becos' along o' what you said, I reckoned 'twas a Little Girl. An' when I see it standing up so gallant and looking so beautiful I somehows fared to feel as if"—he boggled,—"'twere a Angel instid of a Rose."

"You makes my 'ead fair spin, you do," said Becky, prodding him with her sharp elbow. "Can't you look where I'm pintin'? . . . There, Fathead! . . . Under the tree. . . ."

And Stephen looked below the tree and fell in love with

Lou Buckley. From that day hence, in the garden of his heart, one rose held sway supreme.

9

Where Stephen's ignorant, adoring eyes saw a being of unearthly beauty, you or I would have seen a pretty, brown-haired child in a white fur cap and jacket, standing on tip-toe to return stout Mr. Buckley's kiss. The serge frock under the fur jacket was also white, and the silken brown curls were daintily tied with a bow of silvery-pink riband—very much the colour of the roses on the little tree.

"And how's my Lou, and has she got a kiss for her old Gramp this morning?" asked the portly gentleman, beaming as Lou hugged him round the neck.

"Three," said Lou, proceeding to administer the kisses. "And one that mother sent you because she couldn't come."

"Got the pudding on her mind, that's what she has," said James Buckley, winking at his father. "And the turkey. A regular monster, all of sixteen pounds. But you've met him before, I fancy, Dad!"

"I should rather think I had!" returned the jolly-looking old gentleman. "In Leadenhall Market, yesterday, before the Public got in. They were going to hang him on a hook," he added for Lou's benefit, "but he begged so hard to come with me that I hadn't the heart to say 'No.' So I had him put in a hamper and sends him to Emma at Sidcup, knowing she'd treat him kindly."

"And she has, she HAS!" reiterated Lou, bounding on the Market stones.

"Filled him cram-full of good things, eh?" asked the old gentleman, chuckling.

"Sausage-meat," said James Buckley, as Lou skipped in rapture, "and egg and bread-crumbs and chopped herbs, and I don't know what all. But Lou does!"

"Because I helped," said Lou, "and crumbled up the bread-crumbs, and shook the flour in the dredger over him when he was full."

"Well, well! To-morrow, please God," said jolly Mr. Buckley, "we shall all of us sit down to table and eat a

bit of him. Not Lou," added the old gentleman knowingly. "Lou doesn't like roast turkey!"

"But she does, she does, she does, she DOES!" Lou was so emphatic in her assertion that every repetition of the word lifted her on to the very tips of her little bronze button-boots.

"Turkey, but not Christmas pudding!" said Lou's father with pretended seriousness.

"Turkey and Christmas pudding too,—all in blue flames and blazes"—Lou opened her brown eyes enormously wide—"and scalded cream with the pudding. And Black Hamburgh grapes, and pineapple, and walnuts and almonds and raisins, and——"

"Phew!" puffed her grandfather, blowing out his cheeks. "Why, that would never do at all. We'd have Lou walking in her sleep again, and scaring of her mother. . . . Has she—since? You remember, James?" He looked sharply at his son.

"Not for a long while now, Dad," returned James Buckley in an undertone. "And as for her appetite, I wish we could get her to eat a bit more. Pecks like a dicky-bird. Her mother thinks 'tis because she's no brother or sister."

"Humph!" said his father, with a darkening brow. "But you're both o' you still young."

James Buckley coughed, a hollow cough, and his father's frown grew deeper.

"There now,—I don't like that!" he commented uneasily, with the shadow so foreign to its cheerfulness darkening his mottled face. "You work too hard, Jemmy my boy. You have no mercy on yourself, and so I tell you plainly. One of these days——"

"S'sh, father! Don't let the little one hear you!"

"All right. But I don't like it!"

"What don't Gramp like?" asked Lou.

"He don't like a hard lump in his coat-tail when he goes to sit down," said the grandfather.

"Why, that's my Sambo doll," shrieked Lou, as the old gentleman fumbled in his coat-tails and drew forth a small bifurcated black object, which he held up by a leg, "O Gramp! don't say he has been hurt!"

"I didn't say so. He hurt me. Here, take him, and don't lose him again!"

Mr. Buckley rubbed a mottled ear and regarded his granddaughter whimsically, as she received the goggling puppet into a warm embrace.

"Bless my soul! All those kisses for Sambo. Well, well! I must get another little girl to walk round the Market with me."

"Me, me! No other little girl!"

Lou flew to seize upon his hand. And there ensued a comedy between the old man and the pretty child.

James Buckley, with his stock sold out and his pockets bulging with cheques and bank-notes, gold and silver and telegrams, stood watching with eyes of love. And two little Sisters of Charity in the habit of the Order of Nazareth—smiled as they glanced in passing at the pair, and stopped at a cry from Lou.

"Sister Josephine! Sister Catherine!"

"Now to Goodness!—if it isn't Lou Buckley! . . . How are you, love? And how's your dear mother? And how in the world do you come here?"

"Why, Sister,"—the second wearer of the close-frilled, snow-white coif and blue-bordered black veil and scapular, turned a withered-apple face and bright black eyes on the rosy, blue-eyed speaker,—“didn't you know her father had a business place at Covent Garden? And Lou is with her father now, aren't you, childie, dear?"

"Yes, Sister. For a special treat my Daddy sometimes brings me. Such fun getting up in the night, and the long drive in the van. And when it comes to nine o'clock we go back to Gramp's, and to bed there. . . . And there's my Daddy and that's my Gramp—and you must come and speak to them!"

"Pleased to meet you, ladies!" says James Buckley pleasantly smiling, as Lou drags her captives over, each by a willing hand.

"Father——"

"Sure, we've met this gentleman before," the elder Sister is beginning, when old Mr. Buckley stops her by saying with his hearty laugh:

"Aha! I thought I knew you both. Well—well! you had me prettily."

"Indeed, and so we did, now!" agrees rosy Sister Catherine. "And very good you were to us, and our old folks at Hammersmith."

"Better than I meant to be," chuckles the cheerful old gentleman, meeting James Buckley's rather puzzled look. "So I warned my men to hold their tongues and keep the tale from my son here. But now the joke is blown on, he may as well know! It was somewhere about Thursday, James, these good ladies were passing through Flora Street, and stopped at my warehouse to ask a trifle for their old folks at Hammersmith. So I pointed to a hundredweight bag of prime Early Roses, standing inside the doorway, where my carters had just set it. And I said to this young lady——"

"Sure, I'm only Sister Catherine," interposed the rosy-faced, blue-eyed nun with calm simplicity.

"Well, I said to her, 'Carry that bag away, and 'pon my honour I'll give it you!'"

"And so I did," said Sister Catherine, "and beautiful the murphies were!"

"That's the point, James,—so she did. Tucked up her skirt, stooped down—whipped up the bag of 'taters in her arms and carried it off down Flora Street. Ha, ha, ha! With my men all laughing at me——" protested the old gentleman, laughing heartily himself.

"Be good enough to excuse my father, ma'am," said James Buckley in a lowered tone, to the withered-apple Sister. "He means no rudeness, but he likes to have his little joke."

"Ah, then, if all jokes cut at us were floury big potatoes, folks might pelt us with them," said the elder nun, "whenever they had a mind! But indeed and indeed they're good to us at the Market,—God reward them!"

"Hinckman! Fetch over a bag of greens and half a sieve of onions," said James Buckley to a passing porter, "and put them in the Sisters' van. Where is it waiting, ladies?"

"At the Burleigh Street end of Tavistock Street. And

may the good God repay you with the love of His Heavenly Child!"

"It's to-night at His Holy Table we'll be remembering you," said little Sister Josephine. "The Reverend Mother, and the Sisters, and the children and the old people too. Glory be to Him! What lilies!"

"For your altar at Nazareth House," said the younger Buckley smiling, as he put a great white-and-golden sheaf into the arms of the radiant nun.

"Sure, you must be a Catholic," said blue-eyed Sister Catherine.

"Not I, but my wife is," said Buckley. "And the little one there as well."

"Down at Sidcup 'twas we met your good wife, and the dear child," said Sister Catherine.

"Early in the summer," Sister Josephine chimed in, "when Sister Catherine and me were on our begging rounds. We were at Our House at Woolwich then, and now we're at the Mother House at Hammersmith, and Lou must come and see us there, and your dear wife too, we'll hope."

"Perhaps she will," said Buckley. "Good morning, ladies, both of you, and a Merry Christmas to you all."

"Happy and blessed be your own!" chorused the grateful Sisters, "and may Our Dear Lord send you many happy New Years!"

Buckley was shaken with his hollow hacking cough as he returned the nuns' good wishes, and the sombre shadow fell again, darkening his father's face.

IO

Lou and her grandfather, in company with the nuns, having vanished down a flowery vista, Buckley was now respectfully returning the good morning of a portly, well-dressed gentleman in a costly fur-trimmed overcoat. An official belonging to the Household Department of a certain Royal Personage, and as pompous as the lackeys of Royalty are ever wont to be.

"Very sorry. Uncommonly sorry, sir, I do assure you.

But that little tree was specially grown for my little girl's birthday. It's the Gold Medal Rose of last year's Show, 'Lou Buckley' I named it for her. . . . No, we haven't got another, nor could we get you one. We British Growers don't set up to compete with France in Forced Rose Blooms this particular time of year. In the French Market at the Floral Hall, they might have the sort of thing required. Straight on, keeping to the right—go in at the West Entrance—unless you'd wish to send my man—and down a flight of stairs!"

And the Palace official went on his way in search of the French Market—called 'the Flea Pit' in the bygone days, as is its successor in these. And as Buckley took his pencil from behind his ear, he felt a tug at his coat-tail, and clapped both his hands on his pockets, that bulged with the takings of the day.

"Mr. Buckley, sir——"

"And 'Sir' to you," said James Buckley with genial pleasantry, looking down from his six feet of height at a boy in a muddy ploughman's smock. Perhaps twelve, or thirteen, standing in his huge shapeless boots about four feet seven, and with eager anxiety shining in the vividly blue eyes of a very freckled face.

"Well, my lad, and what do you want?"

"To work, please, sir," gulped Stephen.

"Work!—what work?" James Buckley asked, suspicious of some canting tale invented to cover larceny, and yet attracted by the freckled face, with its courageous eyes.

"Any work as I could do, sir. . . . Work about th' Markit."

"Groggard!" called Buckley to a shirt-sleeved man, black-haired and bristly-bearded, and with powerful shoulders, who was dealing with a rush of hagglers at the second of his two stalls: "Two pun' ten!"

"Right you are, Governor! Dawks! Take my job for a bit!"

And the foreman and his assistant being apprised of his momentary withdrawal from the vigilant watchfulness incumbent on a Governor who would not be plundered,

James Buckley, subconsciously dealing with his invoices and calls and orders, bent a kind, preoccupied look on the wearer of the muddy ploughboy's smock.

"You want work here, in the Market? Where d'ye come from?"

"Lives out by Tolleymead, Hertf'rdshire," and a grimy hand waved north.

"Humph!" James Buckley rubbed his ear. "You talk too broad for Herts, strikes me, and I was born and bred at St. Albans."

"Mother she comed from Leckley, in th' Coal and Iron Parts."

"Staffordshire. Well, what's your name?"

"Stephen Braby."

"Well then, Stephen, mind your book without wasting your muscles; grow a foot taller, and we'll find you a Market job in another three or four years. Now be off. I'm busy. Groggard!"

"Ay, ay, Governor!"

Stephen's eager face fell dolorously and his heart sat down with a bump.

"Then you couldn't not find me nothing now?" he began and broke down in a whimper.

"Nothing!" James Buckley was already deep in a pile of pencilled invoice-lists. "Till you're sixteen. At the very least. Haven't you got a father? 'Yes.' (For Stephen had nodded.) "Well, don't he do some work?"

"No!" returned Stephen loudly, his blue eyes darkening with anger. Something was swelling in his breast, and he could hardly breathe.

"What does he do?" asked Buckley, pencilling figures on a paper.

"Nothin'. He drinks—that's what he do—an' beats an'—beats my mother!" Some floodgate in the boyish breast covered by the muddy country smock and the ancient sleeved Cardigan had broken, and the pent-up waters burst through and rolled down upon Stephen's soul. . . . "An'—an' I wishes he wer' Dead, I does!"

He clenched his fist as he said it, oblivious of the crowd about, the glances of Groggard and the assistant, and

even the expression on Buckley's startled face. A change came over the face, had Stephen seen, that Lou's coming always brought there. She had tripped back, without her Gramp, detained upon some business, in time to hear the furious words, and now stood near, quite pale.

"'Nuff o' that there Old Bailey talk. Be off!" said Groggard, the foreman.

"You'd best!—What is it, Lou, my dear? Tell father, little love!"

For Lou had run to Buckley and caught him by the coat-sleeve and looked up at him with her big brown eyes shining out of an anxious face. Now she reached higher to clasp his neck and draw his head nearer, so that she was able to whisper in his ear. It seemed that she had heard what the poor boy said, and knew that he was naughty, for to want to kill your Daddy was a simply awful thing. But his poor mother had been hurt——

"It's true he said so, Pretty."

"And a boy who loves his mother Can't be wicked," pleaded Lou. "Can he, Daddy darling?"

"Now how do I know, my Precious? You must ask Groggard. He's more learned in boys than I am. Here, Groggard, what d'ye say?"

"Not so regular an' Out an' Outer but what he might be worser . . ." grunted the shirt-sleeved foreman. "Accordin' to my view. And I've got seven boys at home, confound—Yes, I *did* mean bless 'em! You come down so uncommon sharp on a chap, you know you do, Miss Lou!"

Stephen had heard nothing of Lou's innocent defence of him, nor knew that her soft eyes followed him as he sorrowfully turned away.

He was on the very brink of the roaring human flood that ceaselessly streamed under the murky skies between the flower-decked stalls. Another instant and he would have been sucked in, and carried, who knows whither, but that Lou darted after him and touched him on the arm.

"Boy!"

As her light hand touched him a strange thrill went through Stephen. He turned in dumb amazement to meet

Lou Buckley's eyes. When Heaven sends its Angels down, what can we be but speechless? And the little white fur-clad figure was sufficiently dainty to seem something more than earthly in the eyes of the common boy.

"Little boy! . . . I was listening when you said bad things about your Daddy. Don't you know how naughty it was of you?"

"I'm nobbut sorry, Miss!" faltered Stephen. "If my mother she knowed what I up an' said just now to Mr. Buckley, she'd Hammer me to-rights, she would."

"Then don't say such things any more. For this is Christmas Eve, you know, when the Angels sing in Heaven," said Lou looking (it seemed to Stephen) as though two stars were drowning in her eyes, "'On Earth Peace to men of good will.' And if you hate your Daddy—even if he is cruel—how can you have Peace and good will?"

"I'll say't no more, Miss. Will that do?" The blue eyes looked back steadily out of the freckled boyish face that was topped by a mop of yellow curls.

"Then thank you,—and because I am so sorry, poor boy! for you and for your mammy——"

Lou had kept one of her small hands hidden in a pocket of her white woolly jacket. Now the hand came out and something was pushed into the boy's rough palm. A bright half-crown with the year's Mint stamp, glittering, magnificent. . . .

"I can't not take it from 'e, Miss," Stephen protested thickly, and Lou's sensitive mouth drooped as he thrust her present back.

"But you can, you can! Gramp gave me two. And I have a whole boxful. Mother keeps it back of the shelf in the cupboard where she stores the jams."

With her slender brown eyebrows raised to her brown curls, and her brown eyes shining on him sweetly, and the loveliest flush in her small round face, Lou looked wonderfully like a rose. But in vain. The big bright splendid coin was remorselessly rejected.

"Then wait," said Lou imperiously, "and don't move till I come back."

The Angel Fairy vanished, and Stephen stood waiting

on the margin of the human torrent with his ears full of its roar. His heart felt full of something strange—a joy that hurt him somehow. And Lou was back beside him, with something in her hand.

“For you, poor boy! . . . A rose from my tree that father grew for my birthday. . . . ‘Lou Buckley.’ I’m Lou Buckley. Now tell me your name?”

“Stephen Braby, ’tis, Miss.”

“Stephen Braby is a nice name,” said Lou with her little air of decision. “Good-bye, Stephen. Give my love—Lou Buckley’s love—to your mother, and mind you snip the stalk of that rose, and put it in hot water.”

“I’ll mind to, Miss!” he promised her, “as soon as I get home!”

She was gone, and how poorly he had thanked her! But her gift remained in Stephen’s hand, and lapped him in loveliness. . . .

“‘Good-bye, Stephen. Give my love . . .’”

He said the words over, softly, and looking down at the fragile bloom, knew a stab of awful dread.

Would Lou Buckley live to reach home? For this was Saturday morning, and Stephen was to return for supper no sooner than Monday night!

He drooped his head down over her, drinking in her perishing loveliness, then thrust himself into the moving crowd, and was blindly carried on.

II

To be dropped, he knew not how or when, by the many-legged and many-headed monster. Trodden cabbage-leaves were still under his feet and the din of many voices filled his ears.

He stood again in Russell Street. There were the market vans and drays jammed down the middle of the thoroughfare, the fringe of barrows and carts by the kerb, behind him the mouth of the Arcade.

And the rose was no longer in his hand. He uttered a howl of anguish, and fell on his knees, grovelling in the sticky mud, and whining dolefully:

"My rose, wherever be her? I had her safe, an' now who's got her? If I'd dropped her I'd ha' knowed! . . . Consarn they London prigs!"

A mighty hand grabbed Stephen by the scruff, and lifted him from the pavement.

"Who's gone? Speak up intelligent!" said the voice of authority.

"Lou Buckley. Somebody's stole her!"

"You're a liar, or I'm a Dutchman!" said constable X. of A. Division, dropping Stephen back upon the stones. "You've obstructed me once already to-day, in my duty of regulatin' the traffic. And," he added, "if I did my dooty I'd have you clapped in jail."

"Oh no, please sir!" Stephen babbled, stricken by sheerest terror, "I haven't not done nothing to be locked up for, sir, if you please!"

"What you'd call nothing," said the constable, looking burlier than ever, "is good enough, if I know your sort——"

"And don't he!" cried a barrow-man, looking round over his shoulder as he took off a pony's nosebag. "Ho no! Not him! He don't—nor never did!"

"—is good enough," repeated No. X. of A., unsoftened by this testimony, and blowing out his cheeks importantly, "to get you sentenced to a fortnight's stretch. Or at the best a month. In the Juvenile House of Detention,—where they'd Diet you, and Drill you, an' put you under a System, till the most unwilling householder as ever grudged Rates and Taxes, would know at the first glimpse of you, he'd got his money's worth."

"And right you are, Mister!" said the admiring barrow-man, throwing the nosebag into the cart and slipping back the pony's bit. "For I've seed the results of that Systeming myself on a most owldacious youngster. Brought up by a virtuous grandmother as weaned 'im on boiled sheeps'-trotters which she sold in the public-'ouses, an' took to a life of wickedness as soon as 'e were breeched. Priggin' from shops led to robbin' kids sent on herrands of their mothers' halfpence; an' when 'is grandmother turned 'im out o' doors an' 'e were took to the Union by police, 'e tore 'is togs to that extent as for the sake o' decency 'e were took afore the

County Court Beak in a spare pertatur sack. 'Quod is the punishment for your offence,' says the Beak, which was a kind-'arted gen'l'man. 'But instead o' sendin' of you there we'll try the System on you.' So though this boy 'e begs-an' prays to be sent to quod like other boys, they packs 'im orf to the Juvenile 'Ouse of Detention for three months systeming! An' wot, I asts you, is the result?"

"Don't ask me," said the constable gruffly.

"The result is," continued the barrow-man, "sich a alteration in that boy as 'is own grandmother don't know 'im when the Governors sends 'im 'ome agin to the third-floor-back room wot she's sharin' with three werry respectable families in a lodgin' 'ouse near Bethnal Green. 'Cos why?"

"Because, thanks to the System carried on at the Juvenile House of Detention," returned No. X. of A. Division, "he had become a well-disciplined Boy. A respectable and self-respectin' youthful member of the working-class, instead of a precocious young criminal—which was what he'd been before. And if he is an honest Boy he's grateful to the System."

"Ah. I believe you," said the barrow-man, who was a sturdy, bow-legged fellow, out of whose square red blue-shaven face looked a pair of humorous eyes. "He's so blooming stuck on the System an' the Rules and all the rest of it that 'e can't be 'appy outside of the House. Prefers walkin' round an' round the back-yard to any other form o' hexercise, an' dry toke an' skilly to 'tatur's an' fried hake. Sings 'ymns—that's wot that young boy do—till the drunken lodgers in the third-floor-back can't 'ear theirselves a-cussin',—an' takes cold baths in the cistern till the sober ones chucks up cocoa an' tea, an' goes in for gin an' beer."

"I believe YOU!" said the constable, regarding the barrow-man sourly.

"The butifullest objeck in Natur' to that boy," continued the barrow-man, urged to wilder flights of fancy by this testimony to his veracity, "is a large, loud, pimple-nosed p'leeceman walkin' as if the London flags warnt fit for his outsized boots. Dessay you may guess it warnt long afore that boy were back under the System. Swop me Bob

if 'e ain't so 'omesick for the Rules, an' the Diet an' all the rest on it, that 'e carnt be 'appy on the outside o' the Noo Juvenile 'Ouse! . . . An' when the Governors turns 'im out—never 'aving dreamed livin' boy 'ud find their System pleasant an' comfur'ble—'e goes into the Workus; an' no sooner is 'e landed there, than 'e tears up all 'is clo'es. On which 'e's naturally took afore the Beak, an' sent back to be Systemed an' Dieted—an' so the game's bin goin' on for three or four years. Wot that boy'll do w'en 'is whiskers grows an' 'e gits too old for Systeming fair beats *me*," said Mr. Faggis, "an' that's the solemn truth!"

"Die of a broken 'art, per'aps," said the constable sarcastically, "or be put away in a 'sylum for imbeciles, supposin' that story o' yours true. But I've met your sort before now, 'B. Faggis, Licensed Hawker,'—supposing that's your own name as you've got on your barrow there?"

He jerked a thumb, covered with a big white woollen glove, at the natty dark green barrow, newly picked out with flourishes of red and yellow and white. And Stephen, catching the humorous eye, and the quirky smile of B. Faggis, recognized the hawker who had bought the clock, and given him the rose-painted plate.

"Which I put it to you, Shaver" (B. Faggis was addressing Stephen) "as to whether you're able to testify to having seed me afore? On my bis'ness round, with this here prad and this identical barrer. This very day a twelvemonth back, might be a day less or more." He went on with his professional hoarseness, and his humorous twinkle on Stephen. "When I come round from 'The Pure Drop' after seeing of your Father, and fotch away from your little place—with your Mother's consent and leave——"

"The clock!" began Stephen; "and——"

"Clock it were!" corroborated B. Faggis. "Tall hold hoak, with a square brass face, and a Ship in full Sail, and a Moon. . . . An' a Corner Cupboard—with a Pair o' Blue Dutch Candlesticks. An' two Crockery Spaniels on it, also a Plate wiv the Dook o' Wellin'ton—which I 'ave that Corner Cupboard now at my Place in Lower 'Olloway, the harticles as were inside it 'aving bin sold."

"All right! Since you know this boy, you Faggis, and

his parents——” The large hand of the constable relaxed, and Stephen was free. “Take him away and don’t let me catch him loafing about the Market . . . You hear?”

And as X. of A. Division turned his beefy back and strode into the traffic of Russell Street——

“I ’ear. You, Shaver, nip up in the barrer an’ tie on this bit o’ prickly,” said the hawker, pitching Stephen a coil of clothes-line, and topping his ample load of fruit and flowers and vegetables with holly and mistletoe. “And mind you tie your knots to hold—for—between you an’ me an’ the prad here,—my Missus would as soon set down to fish an’ chips for ’er hannual Crissmiss dinner, as to Roast loin o’ pork with stuffin’ an’ apple sauce, veges, and Plum Pudding, to foller, if she hadn’t got a bit of berried holly to stick about the room. That’s the sort my Missus is, Shaver, and when you see her——”

“See her, sir?” hesitated Stephen, looking at the hawker with rounded eyes through the branches that came between.

“An’ when you claps your eyes on ’er, for you should be a judge o’ fine wimmen,” pursued B. Faggis, “with a Mother such as Smiler and me can take oath to your ’aving got at ’ome—you’ll say as she’s (with one exception being the said mother referred to) the chicest pick of the basket—and the topmost berry in the punnet, and the best cook as ever roasted a loin of Wiltshire pork. Which, Luck bein’ with us and nothink again us!—you’re going to ’ave a cut off for dinner at ’arf-past twelve noon to-morrer, being good old Crissmiss Day. To-day—being Sat’d day, I’ll bet a mag,—fried liver an’ bacon an’ mashed ’tatur is wot she’s keepin’ ’ot in the oven, an’ prob’ly an apple turnover. Pass me them leathers, an’ hold on tight. Now, Smiler, git away!”

And the hawker assumed the reins and whip, and tickled up the prad so effectively that Smiler put down his head, and refused to get away at all. Persuaded at length to make a start, he did so with reluctance, but no sooner were they out of the neighbourhood of the Market, than a sense of duty, fortified by recollections of his stable, started him into a rattling trot, which lasted till their journey’s end.

In Lower Holloway (even at this date connected with the City and West End, not only by the Great Northern Railway and a service of omnibuses, but by tram-lines newly laid)—upon the left of the thoroughfare named Joram's Road, there stood a row of old tiled brick houses, with solid timbers of ancient oak bulging from the masonry of their jutting upper storeys, those on the ground-level having been converted into shops.

A double-fronted shop in the middle of the row displayed a dusty, blistered board above its dusty windows, announcing B. and S. Faggis to be Dealers in Second Hand Furniture and Antiques. Certain parallelograms of fly-spotted paper, stuck to the dusty window-glass by divers gelatine wafers, added in inky capitals:

'BoGHT or XcHaNgD,' and hinted at 'LiBral TerMs.'

Behind these luring promises reigned a wilderness of household articles, impartially veiled in cobwebs and liberally coated with dust; ranging from four-post bedsteads of mahogany and oak, with carven posts, and canopies like pulpit sounding-boards, to rocking-chairs of painted deal masquerading as rosewood; and kitchen tables with one real drawer, and a handle pretending to be another.

Beyond a wave of the whip-hand, pointing out the dusty windows and the dusty store of movables piled up behind them, B. Faggis made no reference to the shop, which was evidently his joy and pride, but getting down, and leading the prad through a gate under a wooden archway, discovered a yard, containing a kennel, inhabited by a husky watchdog, in addition to a pump, a cart-shed and a stable, where he put up the pony and left him to his rack of hay. Then, locking the barrow in the shed and promising Stephen that he should bear a hand at unloading her presently, the hawker mentioned that as his Missus was something particular in the matter of cleanliness, he begged to recommend his young friend to try a sluice at the pump. The sluicing achieved with the aid of a cloth, a bit of soap and a bucket, and Stephen's boots having been improved by being pumped on and wiped over, Faggis relieved his guest of the muddied

smock, "Which however you look at it," he remarked, "ain't no company tog nohow, and had best be left a-soakin' for my Missus to wash out."

Thus Stephen, guiltless of mud and gore, entered the tidy double front-kitchen in the basement under the shop *via* the rearward scullery, and tugged his yellow forehead-lock to Faggis's Phœnix, upon the introduction of his hospitable host.

This very Phœnix among wives was a red-cheeked, black-haired, black-eyed little woman, squat and dusky like her dwelling, and as irreproachably neat, clean and trim. Following up her hearty shake of the hand with a homely word or so of welcome, she proceeded, while Faggis fetched the beer, to dish the dinner up and little more was said until the meal, which consisted of hot tripe and onions, with floury boiled potatoes and an immense treacle pudding, had been served and eaten, and Faggis had lighted his pipe.

"The boy brought the paper, Missus, I suppose?" he asked of his domestic Phœnix, burrowing in the bowl of the blackened clay with a hairpin borrowed from her.

"And shoved it in under the shop-door," said Mrs. Faggis. "An' then cut away, an' hooked it."

"Wivout puttin' up the shutters, as I seed, for which negleck," said Mr. Faggis, "I promise myself to Deal with that same boy. Bring 'im to 'ave a properer sense of Dooty to 'is employers——"

"You've often tried before, Ben dear," said his partner, cheerfully.

"I shall try behind, this time, old gal," said the hawker, taking the paper, "with a bit of ash-plant I've laid by. An' if that don't work, he goes!"

"There's Carols at the Old Church this afternoon," said Mrs. Faggis, rather wistfully. "Pre'aps he's took his mother down to hear the singin', Ben. So why be cross because the boy's not here to read the bits o' news to you? There never was a man so fond of hearing the newspapers read! . . . And you've got such a stupid ignorant old wife that words in three letters is her limit, though she can write after a fashion, if only to sign her name."

“As Witness to a Dockyment, such as a Will,” said Faggis, “in a good bold round ’and—me making my mark with a criss-cross underneath the same.”

“Now, Ben! Whatever’s bin an’ brought that back into your knowledge-box? What are you studying over in that queer crinkled way?”

Mrs. Faggis’s concern arose because Faggis was wrinkling his forehead into folds of crimson leather and staring across the table at the unconscious guest. For Stephen, yielding to the seductive warmth and cosiness of the kitchen, and replete with tripe and onions, mashed potatoes and treacle-roll, sprawled in a chintz-cushioned arm-chair of the ancient Windsor pattern, with fast-shut eyes, and half-opened mouth, a boy blissfully asleep.

“Don’t wake him, Ben!” said the womanly soul; “He’s a pretty, fair-haired fellow, ain’t he? Nor it’s not so long since you an’ me had such a one of our own! But don’t you go to thinking as I’m anything but content and happy, with my good husband alive and well, and business thriving as it do. If I’m a little low at times, it’s just my woman’s fashion of lookin’ past the good I’ve got to the good that once I had! But even you at times, Ben dear, though you allus’ meet me cheerful—you stop longer in the little back attic that was his—than you used to do before!”

“Why, Gord bless the little creetur’!” Faggis protested energetically, “wot uncommon queer fancies she does get in her cokernut, To be sure!”

“No fancies, Ben. It’s what I’ve seen. Ten years it is since we lost him, an’ locked away his little clothes and toys in the room he called his own . . . But how come the football an’ the fishin’ rod there,—and the skates, an’ the concertina, if it wasn’t that to comfort your own pore heart you sometimes made believe he was alive!”

“Like the barmy hold widder o’ ninety-one which ’er ’usband ’ad croaked on ’is ’oneymoon, ’an for sivity year kep’ ’is silk top ’at a ’angin’ in the front ’all. An’ ’is stick an’ umbreller in the stand, an’ ’is razor on the lookin’ glass. Though she might ’ave ’ad a use for that,” said Faggis, “on ’er own. Blowed if I don’t clear the back attic out an’ sell off them things next Toosday!”

“You couldn’t, Ben! You’d find it go agin you if you tried. An’—I made the patchwork quilt, an’ hung up the stuffed canary. I’m as bad as you if it comes to that!” She laughed, with tears in her eyes.

“Is the truckle-bed there big enough for this ’ere young Shaver to kip in? An’ haired enough, so as ’e won’t ketch cold in ’is innercent young nose?”

Faggis rapped his pipe, which didn’t seem to draw, and blew through the stem smartly.

“Why, yes, Ben. Don’t I keep it fit for the Prince o’ Wales hisself!”

“Being so,” said the hawker, “I puts it to you, as we keeps the Shaver till to-morrer?”

“And longer,” said Mrs. Faggis cheerfully, “if his mother’s willin’, and won’t fret?”

“Not her. She’s give him—that’s wot ’e says as we come along from the Markit—Free Leave till supper-time Monday night.”

“Then he’s welcome as the flowers in May to the best that we can spare him. But if a boy like him was mine,” said Mrs. Faggis, shaking her head, “I’d know my blessin’s well enough to keep ’im close beside me, not wanderin’ the London streets with cadgers an’ the like.”

“An’ so would she, I’ll bet a bob! But if you seed the Swipecy Cove that boy ’as got for a father you’d—— What, you’ve woke up, have you, old son!” cried Faggis in a cheerful tone. “In time to tell my Missus your name! Tip it us clear, now! Out wiv it! ‘Stephen Braby! Braby, d’ye pipe?’” said Faggis, as Stephen obeyed. He looked at his wife, who had flushed bright red, and was panting and fanning herself with her apron, rather as though the dinner had disagreed with her, Stephen thought. But at this juncture Faggis rapped smartly on the table. “Pre’aps you’ll oblige next, Shaver,” said the hawker, “with the name of your respected Governor, and tack your address to that. Come! Give it mouth, my lad!”

He repeated after Stephen:

“Wilfrid Braby, Esquire, The Cottage, Tolley Farm Wheatacres, Tolley Brook Road, Tolleymead, Hertford-

shire. Not more'n a couple o' mile from Brabycott House and Park."

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" the good woman cried, helplessly looking at Stephen. "Fifteen—— No! Sixteen years ago, it were! How it all comes back, Ben, dear! Me a young widow just out of crape and weepers for my first one——"

"And me a tidy young bachelor with an eye to steppin' into his shoes. And you bein' took with a wish for country air, an' a sight of the fields an' hedges, I druv of you down to Hertfordshire in August, Eighteen Fifty-Five. In the identical barrer now standin' in our shed," said Faggis, retrospectively, "with ole Scruncher, my wicious one-eyed mule, between the shafts that day. German sausages *he* made long years ago—but there never was a mule to beat 'im! An' gettin' a Nint of Bargains to be 'ad, from a bloke we met at East Marnet, I turns out of my Beat for Brabycott, an' asts for to see the Squire. And a pretty Squire he were too. A sour old Curmudgeon!"

"S'sh!" His wife shook a finger warningly and nodded at their sleepy guest. "His grandfather you're talkin' of. What I can't abear to think is, that that there Will we witnessed has robbed this poor dear boy!"

Stephen wondered how he had been robbed, who never had owned anything.

"Robbed be jiggered," said the hawker, puffing clouds of strong tobacco. "What's come to your 'ead-piece, Missus, as is usual so clear? Don't you know as well as me this young Shaver warn't Born nor Thought on, when we went down to Hertfordshire and witnessed that there Will?"

13

By this time the reiteration of Brabycott and these recorded references to a Will, had revived some long-forgotten things in the memory of the boy. That November when the Shadow had fallen on Steve's happy life with his mother—though but little more than a year ago, seemed far away and dim. But certain points in the story told by Rumbold to Mackilliveray in the tap of 'The Pure Drop'

one November night remained clear in Stephen's brain. Here they came cropping up again in talk between two strangers, who had shown him hospitality, and to whom his heart had warmed.

"Ah, dear, dear!" said Mrs. Faggis. "Many, many years ago. In the August—as now I mind!—of Eighteen Fifty-Five. Just as you and me finished our little meal—which I'd brought in my covered basket——"

"A cold Meat Pie," interpolated Faggis, "washed down with a quart of ale."

"And as we packed the basket again, and you lighted your pipe," said Mrs. Faggis, "the old gentleman—Mr. Braby—comes out of the house into the stable-yard. Scowling so bitter and so black that the sunshine seems to darken, and I said to myself that pre'aps the meat pie hadn't bin' so good arter all. And hearin' that we've come to bid for the beds, in what used to be the stable-men's sleepin'-loft, he takes us up the ladder himself, and shows us what is there. And then—as I'm a-saying to myself, 'What a sour and grim old man you are! an' what in the world with sharp edges have you got buttoned inside your coat?' he asks you whether you can write, and whether I'm anything of a scholar?—and pulls a long folded paper out, and asks us to witness his Will. Which we did—Me writing 'Amelia Byles, Widow,' in every one of the eight corners, with 'Licensed Coster' arter, having my own business then——"

"And me putting my Criss-Cross mark to my name—which you'd wrote underneath your own for me," Faggis broke in at this point. "An' he blots the flourish at the end. Of his name in full on the Last Page, and, says he, as gruff as a mastiff, 'In the Presence. Of You, my Witnesses. I De-livers my Hack an' Deed! Now what d'ye offer for these Truckle-Beds an' Washstands?' And swelp me 'taters! if the old bloke don't spend arf-an'-'our 'agglin' over eightpence, on the werry last day 'e 'as to live, in this 'ere bloomin' world! For 'e ups and dies, a-setting in 'is arm-chair, no more nor a Nour arterwards. Which proves wot an un'healthy thing it is to make your Will."

"Ah! Never were a truer word spoke in jest," said

Mrs. Faggis to Stephen. "As my Great Aunt Gann could witness to, if 'er sperrit 'overed near. The oldest Inmate of the Female Ward she were of Poplar Work'ouse an' cost the Parish Ten shillings a week for close on Forty Year. An' might 'ave been alive and smiling now at the sight of a Bag of Peppermints an' a Nounce an' a nalf of 'igh-dried snuff, which I took 'er every month,—but that she 'ad it put in 'er 'ead as the Thousand Pound 'er keep 'ad cost the Parish Ratepayers were a Investment—payable at 'er Disease to 'er Nearest Relative. Which nothing would pacify that dear Soul, but making a Will an' Testament, leavin' the Money to 'er beloved great-niece, in return for what she'd done. As an Example, so she ses, as 'ow Filial Kindness is Rewarded! An' passed away, peaceful as a babe, after signin' the Will before Witnesses,—which were the Doctor and the Matron—in a lovely copper-plate 'and. At Ninety-eight, an' I 'ad to pay One Pound for the Lawyer's paper, an' Two Pound Ten—not bein' grudged! to Save 'er from a Parish Burial."

"Perish me pink, Missus! if my bonce ain't fairly spinnin'!" exclaimed Faggis, "betwixt you an' your great-Aunt Gann! See the boy's eyes poppin' out of 'is 'ead like a brace o' bluey marbles, tryin' to keep up along of you, runnin' ahead full steam!"

"It'll seem more nat'ral to him by an' by," said the pleasant woman, smiling at Stephen, who smiled and nodded back again with the greatest of good will.

"As the Omnibus Com'ny said," retorted Faggis, "w'en they made the bus-'orse climb a ladder for to git into 'is stable. Though I've bin spliced to yer for sixteen years, an' ain't got used to it yet!"

"We got married in the October o' the same year in which we 'ad that meetin' with your grandfather," said Mrs. Faggis to Stephen, "on what turned out to be, as Faggis says, the very last day of his life. An' the Will we witnessed being lost,—you do know what's meant by a Will, don't you?" Stephen nodded, and she continued, "The Property went to your Aunt, Miss Ann. Which she died two year arterwards, I don't know of what complaint."

"Smallpox, ma'am, please," supplied Stephen, "an' they buried her under the Liar's Stone that's on the Tower o' Tolleymead Church."

"Wot stone, my boy?"

"The Liar's Stone," said Stephen. "With the verse o' poetry on it, all about Hell and such-like, as were made by the Wicked Man."

"My Goodness me!" Mrs. Faggis gasped as Stephen repeated the epitaph. "He knowed where he were a-goin' to, anyways—which is more than some of us do!"

"I'll lay that Miss Hann, or whatever were her name, thought she were be'ayvin' like a Christian," said the hawker, "when she left all the Property to Strangers an' cut off her only brother with a ring! Eighteen Fifty-Seven bein' the year she died, an' he went to Law to git the Property, and Tusser, Worrill an' Stickey of Furnival's Inn, had advertised in the papers offering a Reward of Three Guineas for the address of Any Person who had seen a Will in the Possession of the Late Geoffrey Thomasson Braby of Brabycott, as far back as the Fourteenth of August, Eighteen Fifty-Five."

"So, knowing what we did, my dear," said Mrs. Faggis, as she looked across at Stephen, "me and Faggis wrote a answer to the address as was given in the Paper—and called on them Lawyers in Furnival's Inn, to be questioned on our oath. And you remember, don't you, Ben?" she continued, "how they told us, that in that Will we'd witnessed, every penny went to Braby's son. Which being father to this here boy (an' when you told me his name just now, my inside turned right over), don't tell me as he isn't robbed, because you know he is!"

She looked across at Stephen now, with motherly concern and pity, and went on, smoothing her apron down with rough hard-working hands.

"A nice fresh-coloured, fair-haired lad as any parents might be proud of. I'd say it if they walked among the greatest in the land. And through the losin' of that Will, instead of bein' eddicated with his class and kind, an' becomin' a young gentleman, he's been brought up as rough an' coarse as the son of a common workin' man!"

Stephen felt scalded by the words, though they were kindly spoken. The blood in his veins seemed mingled now with something that pricked and stung. He snuggled back into the chair and hid his hot face against the cushion. But Faggis was answering his wife. And Stephen listened again.

“A sober, decent workin’ man, we’ll ’ope, an’ not a Swipecy Customer, which is wot ’e ’as to stand to him in the place of a Governor. Think if the Property ’ad come to ’im! My bloomin’ stars and garters! See ’im at the Tap at Tolleymead to-day, tippin’ the quarterns down!”

“Mind the boy, and don’t be uncharitable, Ben!” pleaded the gentle woman. “What chance ’ad that pore creetur’ ’ad, treated as ’e ’as been?”

It had never before occurred to Braby’s son that the Enemy might be an object for pity, or that, apart from Malvina he could be regarded without disgust. But the compassionate words from these honest lips softened him towards the wretched father, who had made such ruin of his own life, and brought misery and want into their home.

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“Think of him kind,” said Mrs. Faggis, nodding at Stephen earnestly, “or try to if you ain’t able, which is somethin’ arter all. Rather than speak bad things of him, swaller ’em an’ say nothin’! An’ because, being weak, the loss of all he might have had, has crushed and blighted him, make up your mind as Poverty ain’t a-going to discourage You! Don’t be ashamed of honest work, of whatever kind it may be. So long as it brings you bed and board, it’s fit for you to do. Not but wot I ’ave wondered ’ow a young gal I knowed could ’ave learned Pinking from ’er Father—him being a Nundertaker in a Cheap an’ pop’lar Line. But though Pillers in Coffins you must ’ave for to be buried respectable—not even with Frills about my face cut out in stars an’ such, would I lay my ’ead on shavin’s till the soundin’ of the Trumpet. Bein’ not only crackly, but——”

“Stow it, Missus, d’jeer! With your corfins an’ trum-

pets," roared Faggis, appalled by the mortuary turn assumed by the conversation, "you're makin' the 'air stand up on me 'ead, an' the Shaver shake in 'is shoes! Though a proper young Shaver I should call 'im myself, an' a credit to 'is mother. Which, 'cordin' to talk I chanced to hear at the public Tap at Tolleymead, she kep' 'im in Curls an' Petticoats, till a year an' an 'arf ago!"

"Then his mother did ought to be ashamed of herself," exclaimed the wife indignantly, as Stephen squirmed with anguish in the arms of the Windsor chair. "What could she ha' bin thinkin' of, the silly little creetur'!"

"Little ain't the word azackly, for she's the biggest woman I ever see. An' the 'andsomest. All but one," said Faggis, winking, "an' I reckins you knows 'oo she is. Not as you're to call a Whopper, but more on the Bantam side. So give us a kiss, old lady, an' mix us another jorum, an' stir it with your little finger, so it won't want sugar in! Pipe that sound o' people clearin' their throats. Twig that shufflin' on the flagstones!" cried the hawker, as a ring at the stable-yard gate was followed by the barking of the dog. "That's the Choir come round from the Church, for to tip us the Carols, I lay! Cut, Shaver, an' undo ole Towser's chain, an' shut 'im up in the coal-cellar, or 'e'll git the Curate by the pants, like 'e did last Chrissmiss Eve! Missus, you remembers? An' frightened the young ladies so bad that they 'ad to 'old on to the young gen'l'men. . . . Stop!" yelled Faggis, as Stephen made for the door. "Towser ain't acquainted with you, an' Legs bein' his weakness, I'll go myself, havin' got to fetch the Oranges from the barrer outside . . . Git out them Bottles o' Ginger Wine, an' set out the clean glasses, Missus, likewise the Pound of Acid Drops, which Carollers are partial to. An' the tin of Mixed Biscuits, mind you don't forgit, young ladies bein' sweet on 'em, though crumby for the upper notes is wot I find myself."

And Faggis vanished into the backyard containing the pump, and shed and stable, to subdue the protests of the husky dog against the admission of the Choir. Which musical body, at first conjectural through frosty fog, ere long materialized into at least a dozen young ladies, muf-

fled against December colds in fur-trimmed jackets and woollen clouds, and an equal number of capped and great-coated young gentlemen. Who, shepherded by the Curate, panoplied, in respect to the husky dog, in stout black leather gaiters, invaded the precincts of Faggis's back-yard. Here they prepared to sing, by the light of several smoky lanterns, but Faggis would not hear of this, and so they all trooped inside, to be welcomed by his cordial wife in the comfortable precincts of the kitchen, whose rafters, with such heartening and familiar Christmas Carols as 'God Rest You, Merry Gentlemen,' 'While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Night,' and 'Hark the Herald Angels,' the young gentlemen and ladies presently caused to ring. When a pause in the entertainment came, the array of clean bright glasses which figured on the table, were filled from the bottles of Ginger Wine, and a muster of cups and saucers hospitably flanking these, were frothed to the brim from a giant jug of boiling cocoa. While the oranges in two piled-up dishes, a portly bag of acid drops and the Mixed Biscuits previously referred to, were hospitably pressed by Faggis and his wife on the unreluctant guests.

Stephen uncommonly enjoyed going round with these luxuries, saying: "Do, Miss, take another," or "Please, try an acid, they're good for the throat!" And he got quite a thrill when he was smiled upon by the youngest and prettiest lady soloist, who had brown curls that strayed upon her shoulders, and eyes that reminded him of Lou's.

"Do you sing?" the young lady asked him, as he brought her a cup of cocoa. "No! Yet you have a singing face. Hasn't he, George?" And the young gent whom she addressed as 'George' sulkily grunted in answer:

"Oh, bosh, Jessie!"

Why should he grunt at Jessie, if she did call him George? And why wasn't Jessie angry instead of looking pleased? Stephen conceived a hatred for the young gentleman named George, who possessed luxuriant black side-whiskers. In addition to a preternaturally deep bass voice (which, when in the character of Good King Wenceslaus he ordered his retainers to Bring him meat and bring him

wine, drove Towser, the husky watch-dog, into ecstasies of barking in the cellar).

But the young ladies, pretty or plain, and the young men, including the black-whiskered George, trooped presently away with the Curate, calling back, 'Merry Christmas' and 'A Happy New Year,' and Faggis ran after them to put something that chinked into the slit of the money-box, and came back again with frosty fog in his throat and hair and eyelashes, and let Towser out of the cellar, and chained him in the yard again. And a supper of bread and cold meat and cheese 'and Cocoa for the boy because it's best for him,' with hot spiced beer for Faggis and his Missus, ended the glorious day. A day of days in Stephen's life, most wondrous and unforgettable, the story of which he has told to his grandchildren many a time since.

Faggis went out at half-past nine—he said to see his tailor. And Stephen went happily to the truckle-bed in the little attic bedroom, which was spotlessly clean and cosy, and kept warm by the kitchen flue.

And wakened at Twelve, all snug and warm in clean sheets and woollen blankets, with the feeling that his mother had been in to look at him, and had kissed him as he slept. And the room was full of Christmas chimes from bells both near and distant (mingled with the snoring of the couple who slept on the other side of the partition wall). So Stephen went to sleep again, to wake with the sunshine on his eyelids, to the first Christmas morning he had ever spent from home.

At the foot of the bed stood a rush-bottomed chair, with, displayed to the best advantage, a new suit of clothes of Stephen's size, cheap and common, but warm and comfortable. 'For SteveN BraBy from 2 Trew fRenDs,' said a paper pinned on the jacket, and there was a peaked cloth cap to match, and a necktie of bright blue.

And he spent the day with his new friends. So humble, yet compared with Stephen, so rich in the world's goods and gear, and went, in the new clothes, with them to Church. . . . And came back to a Christmas banquet of Roast Loin

of Pork and Plum Pudding, shared by a merry gathering of half a dozen guests.

And they had Spiced Negus after dinner, with apples and nuts and oranges, and played cards for counters, and sang songs, to the accompaniment of the melodeon. And when under the mistletoe the ladies of the party were saluted, Stephen kissed his motherly hostess, and did it with a will.

And so ended another glorious day, unclouded save at moments, when Stephen knew a pang of regret at the loss of Lou Buckley's rose. Though the gift of the flower from that childish hand had brimmed his heart with sweetness. That sweetness which when first it comes, we cannot even name.

15

On the afternoon of Boxing Day, fortified by a substantial dinner, Stephen set out upon the road that led towards his home. He wore the brand-new suit of clothes and the new cap and necktie and Faggis had added a pair of boots that fitted, and were barely worn.

So he bade good-bye to his kindly friends, and the pony 'Smiler,' and the watch-dog, and the corner-cupboard, and Mrs. Parmint's clock, with the Moon and the Ship on its square brass face, presiding over a dusty maze of Antiques and modern furniture in the rearward part of the shop.

The old garments made a bundle that was heavier than the first, but the dozen or so of oranges that Mrs. Faggis had slipped in, and the whack of cold plum pudding that was wrapped in a clean cloth (so that Mrs. Braby, the giver said, might judge as to her cooking), rather took from, than added to the weight of it.

Tramping, then, and getting occasional lifts behind empty market-vans, Stephen reached East Finchley, accomplishing the rest of the journey home in the donkey-cart of a sweep. Washed as a tribute to holiday-time, and looking unnaturally pallid in consequence, the sweep was going over to Tolleymead to sup and spend the night, and the following day, with a married daughter there. And so they quitted

the Great North Road, for the road that ran by the Branch Line, and the Tolley Brook, that had accompanied Steve all the way from Tolleymead to Finchley (hurrying south to be the Brent River, and widen into the great Reservoir) grew smaller and smaller and beautifully less, until, a mere runnel of brown water, wimpling over watercress-clumps and bent-grass, between banks that are high and steepish, you take it with a running jump, or soberly cross the stepping-stones that are dry-topped most of the year.

“Not but what in Janiwerry an’ Febiwerry I have knowed the Brook in Flood here,” said the sweep, as he pulled up to let Stephen get down, and accepted threepence for pay. “Good evenin’, sonny. Tell the gals from me, you’ll be a man before your mother!”

And the sweep, hoarsely chuckling, vanished into the dusk as Tolleymead Church clock whanged five. It wanted half an hour yet to supper-time at the Wheatacres, so Stephen jumped the Tolley Brook and went for a stroll round the Green.

Being Boxing Day, the Post Office and the baker’s were shut up, and the furtive gleams of lamplight showing at Thickbroom’s chandlery meant no more than the ordinary Saturday’s run on the chandler’s treacle-keg. Peering in, Stephen could see a queue of jam-pots and cups and mugs, and bowls, standing on the floor in the neighbourhood of the slowly dreeling peg-hole, to which lighted matches and candle-ends had to be applied, to produce any treacle at all.

Mrs. Thickbroom said, Put down your mug or cup or bowl or jam-pot and look in again in an hour or two, but she made no promises at all. She did her best, as typified by the tallow and burnt match-stumps and so-forth you found in your treacle when you got it—and as she very justly said, no woman could do more.

Treacle was uncertain in its ways and affected by the weather. Mrs. Thickbroom said it—and nobody had a better right to say. On her weekly wash-day the reluctance of the keg to produce treacle was wonderful, and its parsimony was equally pronounced on a Festival or Bank Holiday.

The sagas of Tolleymead enshrine the tale of a chill sus-

tained by a resident, whose wife knew that treacle Posset was the one thing to break the chill. The dramatic climax is the meeting between the treacle and the patient,—the one coming out of his house screwed down, and on his way to be buried; as the other, borne by a little girl—arrives at the corpse's door. . . .

A cheerier story, dealing with the tardiness of treacle, tells of an expectant mother who projected treacle tarts. When she quitted the chandler's, leaving her bowl at the end of the queue near the peg-hole, it was close on half-past nine o'clock of the first Monday in August, when red Victoria plums are ripe, and the Roundabouts pitch on the Green. When the customer looked in on Friday, wheeling twins in a perambulator (an article of double capacity having figured on the list of wedding gifts), the treacle was coiling down into the bowl as languidly as when she had left it, and the bowl—this is the marvellous thing—was not yet half-full.

The little bell over the shop-door tinkled as Stephen entered, and a queer conglomeration of ancient smells rushed at him out of the murk. There was Mrs. Thickbroom, back of the shop (a study in foreshortening), bending over the keg (as much as her figure allowed bending) talking to a female friend who had come in to fetch her treacle,—for interminably as the treacle trickled out of the keg, did the gossip of Tolleymead trickle out of Mrs. Thickbroom, as she alternately applied the candle-flame to the peg-hole, and rummaged in its recesses with a skewer. What little light was in the place got hopelessly lost in the endeavour to illuminate the wilderness of vendables that obliterated its walls and floor. And hung from its cob-webbed rafters, were hams, bootlaces and crinolines, skipping-ropes and clothes-lines and balls of string in nets.

Cheese, hearthstone, brooms, ginger-beer, mouse-traps and pickled pork and sausages, sides of bacon, pig's-cheek, hanks of yarn for knitting socks, tins of cocoa and Patent Foods. Tinned Australian Mutton and Tinned Australian Beef, with mysterious brands upon them; jars of rhubarb jam for retail, and penny bottles of castor oil, camphorated oil

and pickles, firewood, bull's-eyes, and matches, were sold by Mrs. Thickbroom at her chandlery on the Green.

A blue gallipot Stephen recognized as belonging to his Masterpiece, stood on the end of the counter with a battalion of filled mugs and cups. The sight of it plucked at the boy's heart as the little door-bell jangled; and Mrs. Thickbroom stemmed the flow of her inexhaustible stream of gossip with her characteristic 'Pumpf.'

I refer to a sound, curious and unique, which might thus be phonetically rendered. Not a gasp, nor a snort, not a grunt nor a wheeze, but partaking of their combined nature,—Mrs. Thickbroom being the victim of a number of complaints, which 'blocked her passages' as she said.

As 'troubles' she referred to the said complaints, which began with asthmatic trouble. A bronchial trouble and a trouble in the head (termed 'snuffles' by irreverent folks) combined with a rheumatic trouble, a neuralgic trouble and a heart-trouble, resulted in the blocking of Mrs. Thickbroom's passages.

"Friday were the day I see him last,—pumpf!" said Mrs. Thickbroom, who punctuated her sentences with 'pumpfs' or brought them in at the end. "Which dropped in naxidental wise as—pumpf! She come five minutes before him. An' innercent as the unweaned Babe—pumpf!—I could take my Bible oath! putting down that gallipot on that identical floor, and saying as how—pumpf!—she'd call for it on Monday."

Here Stephen coughed,—the deep bass cough of a full-grown bearded man. But neither of the women heard, or looked round as he hoped they would do,—to be impressed by the sight of the stranger in the brand-new suit of clothes.

"Saying as how a currant and—pumpf!—treacle Bake she'd planned for their Christmas dinner—and little enough 'twere like to be, I knowed, poor Soul!—too well. Her Master, as she calls him, spendin' at the Tap all he can git of her earnin's, an' Mrs. May at the Dairy Farm, havin'—pumpf!—stopped her workin' there——"

The friend made an indeterminate sound, conveying interest and attention.

“She says as her Master baint able for to work. Pumpf! —we know what his complaint be! Pumpf! Barely has she breathed them words about Baked currant-treacle Puddin’ when—pumpf!—Mackilliveray busts in at that door, as savage as a Market-mad—pumpf! . . . For Bull,” said Mrs. Thickbroom forcibly, “is a ’and-reared lamb beside him. An’—‘Dom that Bell! D’ye keep Bootlaces?’ he says, an’ what with my poor dear asthmy, an’ my—pumpf!—poor heart flutterin’ like a Bat, an’ the Shop-door Bell jiggerin’ itself into fits, I could do no more than stare.”

‘Pumpf!’ would have come in so naturally here that Stephen nearly said it.

“Bootlaces we keeps and why deny,” continued Mrs. Thickbroom, waving the candle at a solid sheaf of the articles she named. “Three pair for Twopence, common sort. Leather—pumpf! Threepence, I tells ’im. Which in his red eyes then I sees no memory o’ what he’s said. There he stands an’ looks at she, an’ she takes no manner o’ note o’ him. Pumpf!—no more nor if he’d bin a spider on the wall.”

“To Goodness!” cackled the listener. “Can’t the man take No for an answer? ’Tis fur all the world like a fullish babe a-crying fur the Moon. Can’t he leave th’ decent cretur be and trapse after some of his flash ones? An’ what do he do then, Mrs. Thickbroom, ma’am—if so be as I may ask?”

“He props th’ door as she’s—pumpf—passin’ out, an’ ‘Is she goin’ Home?’ he ask, fur if so her way’s his own! An’ she answer him, wi’ my own—pumpf!—ears I heern her,” said Mrs. Thickbroom. “With my own—pumpf!—and ever will I witness to the same!—‘Wheer I be going be naught to you; as your way is not My way!—nor never would if on this earth wer’ but we two alone!’ An’ a mask o’ sweat that Mackilliveray were when she goes—pumpf!—out an’ leaves him; wipin’ his face wi’ his neckhandkercher as his hand it do trimmle like a leaf. An’ Dazed as by liquor, though sober enough, he—pumpf!—asts me, ‘What about that “backer”?’ Which not being Licensed I tells him as much; and he tramps out, bangin’ the door. An’ sendin’ the bell into gibberin’ fits, sech as never did I—pumpf!—

before that moment. If I was never in this life to speak to it agen!"

Here Mrs. Thickbroom's constitutional troubles asserted themselves unanimously, and she pumped so long and so persistently that the customer prepared to go.

"So that's all!" she commented, picking up her pot of treacle. "There's barely the twopenn'orth here, but I must be gettin' home."

"Pumpf! As to that, please yourself," returned the chandleress faintly. "Treacle takin' its own time—pumpf!—and neither to be chivied nor coaxed. But if you ask whether that's all—pumpf! I couldn't tell you!—More than this, that Mackilliveray slep' that night at the New Railway Works. An' Downed Tools early on Christmas Eve, afore the Gang had well begun upon the half-day,—an' went up to Finchley—pumpf!—by the Truck an' Ballast Engine plyin' on the Line. An'—pumpf!—What be more, he ups an' takes her Bye along wi' him!"

"Well of all the owdacious imperence! Be you certain sure it's true?"

Mrs. Thickbroom confirmed it with a 'Pumpf!' as Stephen rapped a halfpenny on the counter, and said in deep manly accents:

"A box o' lights here, please!"

"We're closed," said Mrs. Thickbroom from the back of the shop, peering out of the darkness, with her candle-stick in one fat hand, and the other flat upon her chest. "For the holiday. Pumpf! Can't ye see the shutters up to winder?"

"Then," said Stephen more gruffly still, as the customer went out with her treacle in her hand, and the little bell jingled on her skirts, "can you tell me if a lad named Steve Braby be a-living in these parts yet, Missus?"

"He be," was the reply of the chandleress, "an' he've more time than I ha' got for play-games, as I—pumpf! There's your mother's gallipot standin'—pumpf!—on the counter end along of the filled ones, an' you'd best to take it wi' you, or that puddin'll never be done! The treacle it be paid for,—pumpf! Tell your mother as I said so. An' if she finds a Mowze in it 'tis—pumpf!—nat'ral at the time

o' year. For Thickbroom an' me 'ad a Gobbler—pumpf!—wi' biled Gammon for our Christmas dinner; an' while there's a giblet or a bone left—that cat turns up her nose at Mize! An' this here pound o' pork-sausages, an' this here bag o' currants, this quartern o' flour, also these packets o' brown sugar an' best black tea are paid for," said Mrs. Thickbroom. "So you take 'em to your mother. And you'll say: 'From Mrs. Thickbroom With the Comblemens o' the Season, an' her hopeful, kindly wishes fur a Happy New Year!' Don't drop the things in the muck, now,—or slam the door behind ye. Nor set that drabbited—pumpf!—bell a-ringin' as ye go!"

As Steve's faithfully-administered backward kick sent the bell into paroxysms of jingling, he realized that the darkness of Mrs. Thickbroom's shop had nullified the effect of his new clothes.

16

He slipped into his mother's little garden noiselessly, because of the Enemy, and hid his bundle and parcels in the shed before he raised the latch of the door. To his joy, Malvina was alone, sitting by a tiny fire of hedgerow sticks, that burned and crackled cheerfully enough.

To Stephen in his boyish denseness, there was something wounding in the fact that she saw him before his trousers. Yet her mother's kiss, with that fragrance of the fields that always clung about her, was so dear a thing that as it pressed his mouth, his eyes were wet for joy. When he relaxed his happy hug and her arms could let him go again, he stepped back to admit of her taking a comprehensive view.

"Yo', Steve, wheer did yo' git them duds?"

"Guess then!" His blue eyes challenged.

Together there, with the dancing fire on the walls, and floor and ceiling, he could forget the Shadow and be happy as before it fell.

"I'm afeard to guess."

Stephen's Masterpiece afraid. . . . His look showed his astonishment. He crinkled the fair skin over his yellow brows and narrowed his black-lashed lids at her. Then

something came back into his mind. He had got a message to give her. He said, frowning to bring back the words:

"I'll say where when I've told ye summat."

"What ha' yo' to tell?"

"A message-like as I ha' got to give 'e. Th' Man—"

"What Man?"

The red mark upon her neck left by Braby's whip had been there a moment previously. Now it began to pale and fade away, as streams of angry crimson rose spread over her sunburned skin.

"The Man as stood by the cowyard gate——" began Stephen, wrinkling his forehead.

Malvina said with her great grey eyes, stern now, not tender, on his own:

"Behappen I knows no such a man, or would ha' nought to do wi' him!"

"Well, he've gone away for good, he says. An' I were to mind an' tell you."

"WHO said yo' wer' to mind?"

"Hisself. Mackilliveray said so."

"Did Mackilliveray gi' yo' they new clothes? Answer! —'fore I tears 'em off'n yo'!"

She was like a lioness, Stephen thought, as she gathered her limbs for the spring.

"Answer!"

Her eyes were terrible. Stephen's lips were white as he faltered:

"He did'n. 'Twas Faggis gin 'em me. Fur a Christmas present, like."

"Yo'll tell later how Faggis came to clothe my flesh and blood fur charity. What I'll hear from yo' now is how come my son to foregather wi' such a man as Mackilliveray?"

Stephen was hardening to sullenness. What had he done to anger her? He said glumly, twisting a button on his despised new coat:

"He gi' me a lift so far as London."

"How?"

"In a truck o' the ballast-engine that brings the road-gangs from Finchley to the New Railway Works."

“Has he who tempts yo’r father to drink, worse than he would wi’out him, given any Liquor to yo’r father’s son, or tolled yo’ in to any house o’ sin? . . . Look me, your mother, in th’ face, an’ answer plain an’ honest, ‘Ay!’ or ‘No!’ ”

“No!”

“Then I thank the Lord! But—”

Her bosom heaved less stormily, and her stern grey eyes were softer.

“But that’s not all. Hev’ that bad man axed yo’ Questions about me as is yo’r mother,—and hev’ yo’ answered—as yo’ should not—or bin silent as yo’ should?”

Stephen, dyed scarlet to the hair, stammered in pitiable confusion:

“I told—I told him as you’d losted of yer job at the Tolley Hall Dairy Farm.”

“Yo’ did! Say now, do yo’ reckon yo’ deserve to git welted fur yo’r blabbing?”

“I reckons——”

There was a lump in Stephen’s throat, and his eyes were stung with tears.

“I reckons I does!”

“An’ so does I!”

Malvina reached a hazel stick from the corner near the fire, ran her thumb down its supple length and poised it in her hand.

“We be ’greed on that. Be nimble now, an’ off wi’ that theer jacket. An’ then yo’ll ha’ yo’r supper as I’m keeping hot fur yo’. Fur if I mun be yo’r Father, by-times, I’m none th’ less yo’r mother.”

Her voice had its dove-like softness again, and her eyes were not a lioness’s now. But the line of her firm mouth did not relax and the dimple kept in hiding until Stephen had had his welting,—and a thorough welting, too.

“ ’Tis over. An’ if I’ve spiled th’ stick, I’ve done ye good, I reckins. Pull on th’ jacket now, my man, an’ gi’s a grip o’ yo’r fist!” The deep dimple showed in her left cheek, and her stern mouth smiled seductively. “That is so yo’ be willin’,” she said, holding out her faithful hand. . . .

"Mother!" . . . With the utterance Stephen leaped upon her neck, and she hugged and croodled over him.

"My lad's got a cruel woman for a mother. Be that true, my Stevey dear?"

"It baint!" blubbered Stephen, who was crying now. "I says as you're a Masterpiece!"

"Then we'll have our bit o' supper now," she said, smoothing his rumpled hair. "'Tis nobbut dripping toast, my dear, though I'd hoped fur somethin' better."

"Now just you wait? . . ."

Stephen darted out and came back with his load of presents. And though his mother's lofty soul winced at the thought of charity, the charity that comes as a seasonable gift is less galling than the other sort.

The sausages smelt gloriously, and tasted even better when Malvina finally sat down to supper with her boy. The oranges and plum-pudding graced the board, and it was so like one of the happy nights before the Shadow crossed the threshold that Stephen forgot the Enemy, and all concerning him.

But when Malvina rose and set away three sausages in the cupboard, and made fresh tea, and poured it off the leaves, and set it in a jug upon the hob, the laughter died in Stephen's eyes, and his mouth, which curled up at the corners, straightened into a sullen line. There was no forgetting any more.

"Yo'r Father woan't be home till late," said his mother, adding hot water to the teapot, and setting a sugared slice of Mrs. Faggis's cold plum-pudding before Stephen on his favourite willow plate. "He've gone to Wheelwright Rumbold's, an' as like as not will sup there."

"O," said Stephen, and the band of hate, or dread, or both of them together, that had tightened suffocatingly about his heart, loosened, and he could breathe again.

There was a pleasant little interlude when he made Malvina share his pudding. It was sent to her by Mrs. Faggis, he explained, who sought her opinion thereupon. Malvina said 'twas over rich for her own taste, yet a forthright pudding: and knowing this for the highest praise, Stephen was well-content.

Yet his glance reverted to the jug on the hob, and the old double-barrelled shot-gun in the corner, the burned clay pipes and the reeking briar that disfigured the tidy chimney-shelf. The ragged straw hat that hung behind the door, and Braby's battered hunting-crop, topping the thumbed pile of sporting newspapers that lay on the chest of drawers.

Not only to Stephen's fancy, the place reeked of Braby, despite Malvina's scrupulous and Levitical cleanliness. Socks and shirts and underwear of his, neatly darned and newly washed, hung upon her drying-horse before the meagre fire. Absorbing all the warmth of it just as greedily and unscrupulously as their owner would have, Stephen knew, had he been present in the flesh. Perhaps Malvina read in her son's face the nature of the thought that clouded it. She said to him in the mellow voice that was always music in his ears:

"I ha' a bit o' news fur yo'. Yo'r Father ha' jined th' Ringers."

"O," said Stephen, as the long arm that had welted him so soundly with the hazel-stick, came across the table, and took his cup, and filled it again with tea.

"Finish yo'r supper, Stevey, lad!" She touched his cheek with a finger-tip and smiled in his chop-fallen countenance: "'Tis the hopefulest bit o' news as I ha' heerd fur long. For when I married my Master he were one o' the New Ringers, an' took to it so na'ral as he called the Bob for 'em."

"Just so as Mr. Rumbold he calls the Bob fur th' Old Ringers?" asked Stephen.

"Just so as. An' what were th' New Ringers then—bein' grown—wi' the Passing of nigh sixteen years," said Malvina—"to the Old Ringers;—Wheelwright Rumbold he have asked of yo'r Father to rejine. An' yo'r Father he were wonderful pleased at it. An' 'twas kind o' Wheelwright Rumbold. Though yo'r Father mid ha' claimed his place, never havin' gi'n it up; 'Once a Ringer, allus a Ringer,' he says to Wheelwright Rumbold; 'An' yo'll find me come to practise the Changes for the New Year. An' whosumdever jumbles the strikin', or spikes,—it won't be Me,' he says! What be yo' a-lookin' at?"

Stephen's eyes were staring. . . . She could talk like that while the hunting-crop lay there on the chest of drawers! . . . He mumbled:

"Nought to matter. On'y I were wunnerin'—whether he'll jine the Walkers on Walkin' Night this year?"

Swift horror leaped into her eyes. But she fought it down and mastered it, and Stephen having finished now, she began to clear away. She said, after a troubled interval, putting the used crockery on the sink-board:

"That he'd Walk with the Ringers on Twelfth Night—I'll own it had slipped my mind-like. But it be only once to-year." Her bosom rose upon a sigh.

"At weddin's and feasts an' funerals, an' times when the Flag's on the Tower—th' Ringers gits a fair drop give 'em," said Stephen, pursuing the theme. "As fur their Walkin' on Twelfth Night, a-gatherin' fur the Ringer's Supper, as Mrs. Popplewell gits ready fur nine o'clock in th' long room back o' th' tap—though twenty on 'em starts at five to th' stroke, you knows how many sets down to it!"

"Yo've larned a new way wi' yo'r tongue, my son," said Malvina, "since yo've bin away!" And she looked at her boy as a woman will, who has carried him under her bosom, and fed him with her milk, and seen him thrive and flourish as a young oak sapling. And who has believed that his inmost mind is known to her as his body, until the moment when she learns that she knows him not at all.

And she endured a foretaste now of the anguish laid up for the mother, whose love has not developed with the growth of the son she has reared. One day he looks upon her, and his eyes are a child's no longer; and the flowers of her heart (or so she believes)—are weeds to him, evermore.

She was bewildered, even appalled, by this sudden burgeoning of manhood in this shoot of her stem, this twig of her branch, this being sprung from her. Her mental eye took a backward glance and she saw him in the old red flannel frock, loping on the fringes of the whooping crowd that attended the Ringers' Walk.

In the certainty that the weaker-headed among those who took part in the Walking would have to be assisted upon

their homeward way. For that solemn annual perambulation made in company with a money-box, hallowed by the mists of antiquity as it was, yet involved an amount of liquoring that neighboured on debauch.

How had she failed to guess the cause of Braby's willingness to join the Ringers, when their son could grasp his motive with such pitiless accuracy? . . . Was it because they were alike? The muscles of her throat were straitened, and she who scorned the women who cried as 'wimmickers' and 'grizzlers' would have been glad to find relief in a gush of easy tears.

"I've walked wi' th' Ringers since I was eight, and each year sin' then," asserted Stephen, "'cept the year as I got the Mumps, an' wer too bad to go. An' though they'll be as sober as judges when they starts—or teetotallers—or Baptist Ministers—I'm willin' to lay a thrup'ny bit—they'll be tiddled when they gits back home!"

"Yo'd not dare to say a bold-faced thing like that o' Wheelwright Rumbold, of Glazier Bendall!" protested Malvina.

"I've heerd Rumbold wi' his own lips telling Bendall o' last Year's Walking, as he'd got as much on board says he—as he could carry straight! An' he says: 'Tis talk in these here parts as my head be made o' cast iron. Take an' pump on it, Charley-wag, an' ye'll likely hear it fizz!' That wer' last year to'rds th' end o' th' Walk, which we starts as allus from th' Rectory—Rector givin' Five Shillin' fur th' Box an' nothin' to drink at all. 'Fur you'll ha' had enough by time you're done,' he says, 'if my expectations be justified!' An' the Walkers gives him the usual Cheer and starts on the Parish Round. Cap'n Prothero at Waterloo Lodge," went on Stephen, who was now beginning to enjoy himself—"Cap'n Prothero comes next to the Rectory,—the Walk allus beginnin' at the South end o' the Green. Three an' six fur the slitty Box, wi' Cap'n an' Mrs. Prothero's best wishes, an' hopin' the Annual Supper will Prove as 'joyable as the last 'un, and will the Walkers step in the Kitchen an' take a glass o' Ale? An', they gits the Ale an' gives the Cap'n a cheer, an' another fur Mrs. Prothero and the Family—an' off we goes to th' 'Lilacs'—where old Miss Tidsley

'bides. An' Miss Tidsley she sends 'em out by the gal 'as work there by the day, a Shilling an' a tray o' glasses o' home-made Cowslip Wine. Then it's the turn o' Britannia House and Mr. Pushley and the Army Pupils,—they comes out on the Steps in black tail-coats, an' white chokers an' shirts, O my! An' Pushley don't fork out—but there's a Whip-round among the Army Pupils; an' Eighteen bob clinks in the Box, wi' Pushley lookin' on."

"I'd gi' th' man his Mister, if I wer' yo', I reckins!" said Malvina, looking soberly at the excited boy.

"Then Mister Pushley he calls out to the maid 'Glasses here, an' a bottle o' Sherry!' Two bottles it takes fur a glass all round, an' they cheers him—an' the Pupils too! An' Wheelwright Rumbold he makes a Speech, an' a proper, if ever I heard 'un! . . . Then they calls at Miss Quintain's Young Ladies' School, an' Miss Quintain she sends out Tenpence by the Buttons—an' a Message to say that as cheering brings on Mrs. Quintain's neuralgy, will the Ringers be so kind as to do it when they gits to the corner o' th' Road? An' the Young Ladies they smuggles out Three Shillings in pennies an' fourpences, an' a dozen o' Stone Ginger, and please will you be so kind as send the Bottles back! Then," said Stephen, getting warmer as he got further into the recital; "they goes to Commander Nagley at Nelson Lodge where th' Flagstaff is—an' what does they git from Nagley,—with 'is jolly old fat red face? A gold guinea an' a glass o' hot Rum-Punch, with Lemon in it, fur every man! an' after the Punch they give him three times three, an' a little 'un, fur a Tiger, an' sings 'He's a Jolly Good Fellow!' on the lawn in front o' th' Lodge. Half-a-crown they gits, an' home-brewed Beer at Mrs. William Tibbitt's, an' Elderberry Cordial at old Mrs. Dewey's an' a crooked King William sixpence wi' a hole punched in the rim. An' there's more beer at th' 'Spotted Dog' an' seven an' six for the Gatherin' Box,—an' by this time they're walkin' straggly, an' some on 'em wants to Lay Down. So the next place on the Walkin' List bein' the Baptist Minister's,—they sends a steady hand to knock, an' puts the soberest in front. An' Mrs. Tedding, she sends 'em out a can o' tea as was regular red-hot bilin', an' says as they'd

best drink each a cup an' git back home to their wives!"

"And well fur them if they'd have had nought else but tea inside 'em," said Malvina, "from th' time they'd start, till all got home. Eh, deary me! Th' men!"

"Eightpence the Minister give for the box, an' the tea wer' that strong it steadies 'em, an' they're walkin' so it's pretty to see—time they gits to Tolley Hall. An' th' big Hall doors are throwed open wide, as Squire's givin' his Twelfth Night Party, an' don't the Young Ladies look beautiful!" cried Stephen, radiant now. "Wi' sparklin' stones on their neckses, an' armses an' shoulders an' curls, an' wreaths o' flowers in their hair, an' Bokays in their hands. An' the Gentlemen they be curled up too, an' shiny as Grease can make 'em. An' all on 'em in Tail Coats, an' starched white chokers, an' weskits—Buttonhole Bokays an' studs an' chains, an' White Gloves on 'em too! An' the Squire whacks Five Pound fur the Gatherin' Box an' Hot Brandy-an'-Water fur the Ringers, bein' so uncommon Foggy an' cold, he says, which will Warm 'em to a glow! An' some on 'em gets so uncommon warm that they starts in a-Fighting—"

"Don't tell no more!" Malvina begged. How could he torture her!

"An' Rumbold Parts 'em tellin' 'em to Behave like men an' not babbies—an' Butcher Haybitt, as started th' Row, he begins a-cryin' an' blubberin', an' says he, he's knowed no 'appy hour since his poor mother died! An' Pudsey be so bad as him,—never havin' seed his Mother. An' Thick-broom his stummick turns upsy-down, an' terrible bad he be. Along o' th' Elder Wine he says—as never did agree wi' him. An' all way down the Chestnut Drive the Walkers be a-tumblin' on their noses—all but Rumbold, an' Bendall an' two or three more, bein' as Tiddled as ever I see! An' I've walked wi' th' Ringers fower year. But this year I woan't go Walkin'. There's none o' funniment now fur me in seein' men make beastses o' theirselves. Nor I'm none proud, as I can mind"—he met her stern eyes hardily—"in havin' a beast fur my Father, an' that's th' truth to God!"

She drew herself to her noble height, and said in that voice that filled the room, and echoed from its walls and rafters:

“I dunno what th’ Lord’s dumb brutes, as laps from pools an’ puddles, ha’ done—the decent, cleanly things! to be evened wi’ drunken men. Yo’ ha’ spoke your mind, my sonny, an’ now yo’ll hear yo’r mother’s. Him yo’ call Beast be yo’r Father. An’ yo’ will Honour him!”

Stephen, awed by the sternness of her look, thought of the Angel of the Judgment. . . . She went on:

“Honour him as yo’ be bidden in th’ Book, nobbut he do hisself Dishonour. . . . Yo’r changed sin’ yo’ went to London. I wonnot ask yo’ why. Yo’r a man, as was a laddy on th’ night yo’ went out from me. . . . Med-be ’tis in yo’r Father’s blood to ripen over-soon. But take it fro’ me, yo’ as ha’ felt th’ pith o’ my arm this evening, as from this hour I will use the stick to yo’ no more!”

He cried out some passionate, incoherent words to the effect that she was welcome to beat him. That he knew no act of hers was meant for other than his good. That no boy had ever had, or would have, a kinder, dearer mother! and the passionate words seemed to flow by her like wafted thistledown.

“Never no more! Unless it came to angry words betwixt yo’, being follered up by Blows, as more than like to be. An’ then,” the long-vanished humorous quirks showed at the corners of her deep-cut lips, and the corners of her eyes were crinkled, “if I took an’ Hammered him that night for strikin’ of thee silly—think how I’d fare to Hammer yo’, fur liftin’ yo’r hand to he! . . .”

There was a white-hot spark in her son’s blue eyes that did not escape her notice. Ay, they were Brabys both of them and savage as stoats! thought she.

“It be hard for yo’,” she began again, “an’ mappen, ’twill be harder. Often an’ often latelins, I ha’ thowt o’ sendin’ yo’ away.”

“Where?” It was less a question than a cry.

“To some place of Employment,” she told him, “wheer yo’ might work fur a wage, an’ bide wi’ some decent soul.

Or wheer yo' might gi' yo'r work in pay fur housing an' victuals, an' clothing, me havin' no brass to 'prentice yo' to a Master, as yo' know."

He had never loved her so dearly. And she could talk so calmly of their parting! He cried out to her.

"Mother, suppose in a year or two—me bein' stronger and taller, I got the offer of a Market Job up to London wi' a gentleman——"

"Who be the man?"

"Buckley the Grower—You'd come wi' me, wouldn' ye, mother? You'd none stop here to bear wi'—what ye have to bear wi' now! You'd come along wi' me, wouldn' ye, fur I'd never go wi'out you!"

"If a place be offert yo'll take it, lad. My place be here wi' him!"

"Is he more to ye than I be?" Stephen cried to her reproachfully. She answered him, and now there were tears shining in her great grey eyes:

"I took my oath when us wer' wed, as nought but Death should part us; an' not a bein' on this earth I had to love but he. He've changed! I ha' but little hope, as he'll alter fur the better. But this I know. He might be worse;—an' would be, but fur me. Ther's his hand on th' garden-gate!"

Stephen snatched a hasty kiss from her, and darted up the ladder, as the scraping of boots on the besom by the door gave sign of the coming of the Enemy.

There was a little south-looking window in a gable-end of the attic, over Stephen's little pallet-bed. He opened it on its rusty hinge and thrust his hot young head out. The full Moon did not show herself, but the stars were wonderfully bright. . . .

It was a windless night of bitter cold. The sparkling frost had vanished; and haystacks, trees and houses were mere adumbrated shapes upon the Dark. And London—not the mystery it had been, but a marvel sensed and wondered at—lay smouldering beyond the blotty clumps of woods on the horizon-line.

Those cold bright eyes of the stars! So long they had looked down on human troubles. So long, so long they would continue to look, until Stephen's were all done. . . .

But maybe there was Somebody who sat beyond their radiant indifference, Who would understand that Stephen was sorry he had broken his promise to Lou. . . .

Peace and Goodwill. Could they ever reign under a roof that covered Braby? . . . Hot tears of rage and shame and revolt crowded into his son's eyes. Stephen had cried before, that night, but those tears had been sweet ones. And these were fierce and bitter tears that burned like vitriol.

He went to his poor bed, and sobbed himself to sleep under the thin old coverings. And his Masterpiece, creeping up to look at him an hour or so later, with her pot of goose-grease for the soothing of his stripes, and her rags of soft old linen, saw his sleep-flushed cheeks still streaked with wet, and sobbed a little, too.

Again—and conceive the self-reproach of her loyalty against such question—she wondered whether Stephen was not more his father's son than her own! And she felt as though the drop too much in her brimming cup of bitterness, would be—that Braby should have stamped himself in character and disposition—if not in form and feature, on this child of his and hers.

17

Affairs at the Tolley Hall Dairy Farm prospering ill without the faithful service of Malvina, the post of under-dairywoman was offered her again, and shutting her firm lips upon some things she might have said, she quietly returned to her place. And Stephen's new clothes were laid away in a drawer for Sundays and holidays and high-days. And Stephen went back to his field-work again, with some memories to liven toil. The old companionship between mother and son seemed a thing forever vanished, though sometimes, when Braby was away from home, it would waken, and revive. And then Malvina would invite the boy to a lesson in scientific Hammering, and eye to eye and toe to toe they would stand up for a sparring-bout. Or Stephen would read her a chapter from Bunyan or the Bible, as they sat together beside the hearth that Braby would chill so soon.

The wastrel had bestirred himself to no useful end, since

his return from London, though Malvina had looked forward to a day when he would turn his hand to work.

Her hope had died out. . . . For a moment it had revived when he sent Stephen on an errand to the blacksmith, and taking off his coat and vest and rolling up his shirt-sleeves, asked for oil, emery paper, a feather, and some rags. These being provided—and Stephen returning with a file lent by the blacksmith, the old sporting gun was taken from the corner and cleaned and furbished, and the length of its barrel shortened by filing off two-thirds.

Hollowing out the stock-end in a cunning way, and smoothing the file-work on the barrel, had afforded Braby two days of work beside the living-room fire, when there came a scraping of boots by the step, and a knock at the frontward door.

Braby hid his work behind his chair, and signed to Malvina to open.

“Might a neighbour ask you, Missus, if your Master be to home?”

It was Haybitt, the by-way-of-being-butcher. A shambling, awkward, dusty man, with hair like weathered straw-thatch overhanging round staring eyes that were curiously dim and blank. A ruffled condition of plumage, in combination with a sleepy daylight air, distinguished him in common with the barn-owl, and other predatory birds who are active while the world is asleep.

Malvina looked upon the man with unconcealed distaste and repulsion, nor did Haybitt regard Mrs. Braby in a particularly agreeable way. Such humble custom as she could bestow had never been given to this huckster, whose reluctance to display fresh meat for sale while a fragment of the last beast killed remained upon his hands, was a by-word among the more scrupulous of the matrons of Tolleymead. She sickened at the vision of his reeking little shop, as he ducked his frowsy head upon her doorstep. And his blindish eyes, seeming not to see beyond a radius of a foot or so, sharply took in the traces of Braby's recent work.

“Come in, come in!” cried Braby with what for him was heartiness. “My wife's bound outward on some woman's errand—we'll have the place to ourselves.”

As was his way, a studied way, contemptuous, coarse and slighting, he had given his wife no previous hint of an appointment made with this man. But Malvina plucked her bonnet from its peg, and passing the intruder on her threshold, quietly went out, as he went in, and shut the cottage door.

Presently her stately figure with its noble, serious profile and cataract of tawny curls flowing from under the rough straw bonnet, was seen moving across the background of January skies and sere brown woodlands, framed in the square of the front window of the cottage living-room. When the lofty head and the tall form were shadowed on the blind of the side-window that overlooked the garden-patch (the sun being south-west), the visitor jerked his crooked thumb coarsely in its direction and remarked:

“Your Missus likes me no better than she did, it seems to me, old pardner!”

“Women are stubborn fools, we know,” said Braby with a shrug.

“Where’s the woman gone?” Haybitt asked.

And Braby answered indifferently:

“To the wheatacres, I should suppose, to meet her precious cub.”

There was no glitter in the butcher’s dull eyes. But a thought stirred under his thatching.

“Growin’ a big lad, th’ boy is, too. Time ye made him arn his keep!”

“He does that now,” Braby returned, “which is rather more than his father does.”

“If you’d yer rights you’d be drivin’ by wi’ a spankin’ pair in a carriage,” said the by-way-of-butcher, “an’ sendin’ fur me to Brabycott, to bid fur yer sickly cows.”

“Instead of paying so much the pound for carrion you’ve bought of others,” snarled Braby, showing his teeth in the beard that was clean and well trimmed now. But he brought out his bottle and gave the butcher a stiff dram, and poured himself a caulker, and they sat and talked as the sun went down, and were as thick as thieves.

With an aged father in the Union, and a sickly wan-

eyed wife at home, and a family of noisy, tow-haired children, the by-way-of-butcher was regarded by a majority of the better-class residents of Tolleymead as a well-meaning, honest and rather helpless man, who strove hard to feed his family and keep the wolf from the door.

Yet a knowing minority were perfectly aware that the helpless man was master, to a remarkable degree, of the art of helping himself. Not that this art was quite unknown among the inhabitants of Tolleymead. It is not claimed that the standard of morality was loftier in Tolleymead than in other villages; or that its inhabitants respected the laws of property more than they were respected elsewhere.

Far from it. The green gooseberries Miss Tidsley meant to pick for the first gooseberry-tart of the season, would melt off the laden bushes with the dewdrops of dawn in May. The dish of early strawberries would be gathered and gone, ere the goloshes of Mrs. William Tibbitts traversed the layers of damp yellow straw laid between the rows of vines, —the apples blown down overnight in the orchard of Captain Prothero would be gone ere that warrior laid his hand upon the dew-wet latch of the gate.

The Brahma hen that had hatched out a brood in the hayloft of Commander Nagley would be spared the toil of teaching her chicks to hop down the ladder leading to the stableyard. The finest peas, cauliflowers, and cabbages that were grown 'down to 'lotments' would vanish out of the ground mysteriously, and their plots would know them no more. The edges would be neatly shaved off the farmer's outlying dung-heaps, and coal-houses and woodsheds and bush-piles would be bled under cover of the dark.

But those owl-eyes, shaded by the frowsy thatch peculiar to Haybitt, could see better by the darkest night than the eyes of other folks by day. The lumbering feet in the iron-toed boots could run swiftly as a lurcher's, or move delicately and noiselessly as a weasel's or a cat's. A sack, a spade, a billhook, a clasp-knife, a bit of yellow soap and a bunch of odd-shaped keys (for negotiating the padlocks of fruit-houses, coal-sheds, fowl-houses and dairies), in the

hands of the by-way-of-butcher were the tools of an adept. An artist of the most consummate, whose three young sons, to his secret pride, were developing the paternal talents, and promising to follow speedily in their worthy father's way.

With the approach of middle-age Haybitt had taken up the Butchering, retailing the carcasses of such feeble beasts as might be got hold of cheap. He did a bit in Knackery, too, and slanderous people hinted that the choicer equine morsels did not all go to the Kennels, but were bought by the Workhouse Guardians, that Paupers might be fed! . . . And of late years he had driven a flourishing but furtive trade in garden-stuff and orchard produce, not to mention the furred and feathered fruit of local coverts and preserves. Paying those who came to him with things like these for disposal, in hard money, or bottles of gin, of whisky, or of rum.

Thus the bloodstained yard behind the reeking shop held secrets only known to those who had helped to hide them, and their frowsy proprietor was a Power in his way. And not a good one either, as the wives of men, whom need or choice brought under his sordid influence, knew to their bitterness, poor souls! but were afraid to say.

For things happened to those persons, high or low, who were owed a grudge by Haybitt. When you have so many obedient slaves, whom fear, or liquor, or money render supple, pliant instruments of your envy or hate—grudges are easily worked off. In infinitesimally petty ways, which perhaps are the most effective—as the proverb about the dropping of water hints—in wearing out flesh or stone.

18

The sixty-acre wheatfield, bounded on the west by the Tolley Brook Road, was bisected by a rutted cart-track, lumbering rather than running side-by-side with a narrow right-of-way. A gate in the hedge admitted to these, and the cottage occupied by the Brabys, which stood some little distance back in its little garden-patch. The Great North Road was practically the eastward boundary of the wheat-acres, though a wired-in belt of covert and preserve lay

between them and the Road. And in the topmost corner of the nor'east end of the wheatacres, cut off from Braby-cott property by Upper Tolleymead Lane, and sheltered from the northerly winds by a spinney of larch and pine and fir, and a shrubbery of box and laurel—showed the plain white house and outbuildings of Tolley Hall Dairy Farm.

Presently, when the New Branch Railway Works should extend towards High Marnet, the line would cut through the wheatacres, and peace and quiet would be gone. Malvina viewed the prospect with disrelish, like the husband of her mistress at the Dairy. But the Lord of the Manor and the Railway Company had struck a bargain between them, and when two parties out of three say Yes, what use is the third man's No?

"Best take your Compensation," said the farmer, rather grimly, "and put up as pleasant as you can with what you'd stop if you could."

Homespun wisdom, which had served to help Malvina at some cruel junctures. But useless at the crisis she saw approaching now. Stephen's love for her did much to reconcile her with her trials and hardships. But if she were destined to see her humble lessons of honesty unlearned,—she could find it in her heart to wish that the roof and walls of the cottage might tumble in, some stormy night—and kill the three of them in their sleep. . . .

Though she loved with every fibre of her heart the little house and garden, and the wheatlands that spread round them, at all seasons of the year. When the snow lay thick on the brown ploughlands that the hungry plover wheeled over—when the blue-green bloom of the springing corn showed in the sheltered hollows—when the ripe red wheat or the silver-grey oats rustled along the furrows and darkened or lightened with the passing of the faint hot harvest breeze. When the twitch-fires burned, and the harrow jerked at the heels of the strong brown horses, trampling over the clods turned up by the bright curved share of the plough—when the blanketing fogs lay thick on the ground, and the field-path was a quagmire, her faithful passion knew no change. . . . Looking on it, she loved it now.

For here she had been brought as a bride, after Braby's brief hot wooing. Seventeen; think of it!—she sighed to herself, the sad woman of thirty-four. . . . Here she had been loved, and had loved again, with all the fervour of her nature; and here she had borne three babies—and two of them had died.

They were 'wonderful weaklin's' to be born of her who was so strong and hearty. So pure of blood, so full of health and rich vitality. Only Stephen 'framed' to make a stand for life,—whereas the others had slipped out of it, as easily as hour-old lambs, yeaned on a night of snow.

Stephen had arrived one drenching night at the end of a wet October. Her Master gone—Malvina had faced her hour without a neighbour near. . . . Drifting passively to Death, her infant's cry aroused her from her stupor of exhaustion. Its feeble hands had dragged her back from the brink of the Great Beyond.

It was fair-skinned, when it ceased to be red, and blue-eyed, like Malvina's mother, and had hair as yellow as Malvina's own, when it left off being mere down.

And it cried. . . . What an agony of solicitude she had known in the rearing of the weakling! The Nazarite locks untouched by the shears, like the garment of coarse red flannel, and the unsheathed limbs had been the visible signs of a system of wholesale hardening, that rude as it was, had Common Sense for its basis, and saved the child.

"For there's a kind o' pindling blight on the *chavo*,¹ as I reckon," said a Gipsy pedlar who sometimes called at the cottage with her basket of wares. A bronzed and vivid creature with tangled locks of night-black hair, straying from under a red-and-yellow handkerchief, whose step was as free, and whose figure was as tall and active as Malvina's, though she carried thrice the burden of Mrs. Braby's years.

"Ay, there's a curse on the *chavo*, like. I minds when I were a young woman—nor not so young, but I'd a darter o' my own, as was married and suckling o' twins!—there was trouble at a Gorgio's mansion along of the lady's babby, and she an' her nursemaid come on the sly to our

¹ *Chavo*, child.

tents to ask knowledge o' we. . . . For living under the sky as we does, and smelling of the fresh wind forever, our little ones be tough and strong as the little wild moorland *grys*.¹ Whereas the Gorgio babbies be weak an' allus pindlin' an' pinin'. And when the mother o' this here one came begging me question my granny—I hadn't the heart to deny her, and there's how it come about! Says my granny, sitting bolt-up on end under her quilt of red satin; trimmed wi' real lace as she'd larned how to make in a country over the sea; 'Nor never will thrive in this 'varsal world,' says she, 'onless you lets in the air to him; an' keeps the shears from off of his head—and dresses him as a gal!'"

"An' did they?" asked Malvina anxiously.

"They did them there things, missus, though the father o' the babby was agin 'em. But so much respect had his lady for the *Romani chi*² an' her words (for my granny she were terrible wise)—that she dressed her sickly little *chavo* from that day on till his 'leventh year in *raklis rivi-pen*.³ An' he growed a terrible broadly man, an' terrible strong for a Gorgio; and has children an' grandchildren a-many, so you mind what I say!"

"I'll mind it," promised Malvina, rocking her fretful baby.

"And here's another thing to mind. For lapping of the young 'uns, or happing of the old 'uns, there's nought to beat Welsh flannel, whether it's the red or the grey. Straight off the back of the sheep it comes, missus, wi' the nat'ral ile in it—an' for keeping out wet, an' keeping in warmth, there's nought like the wool of the sheep!"

And the Gipsy pedlar went away, the richer for sixpence of Malvina's, and Malvina broke into the rent-money and bought the stuff prescribed. And now you know the reason of the curls that knew no touch of the clippers, and the queer red flannel body-frocks Stephen wore till his twelfth year.

Many would-be lovers, single and wed, had been drawn by his mother's beauty to haunt her ways or follow her

¹ *Gry*, pony.

² *Romani chi*, Gipsy woman.

³ *Raklis rivi-pen*, girl's dress.

from afar with greedy, covetous eyes. So Malvina's feet had been beset with snares, and that they had escaped them, was due to her innate chastity, and her passionate love of her child.

Attentions of a rough, unmistakable kind had constantly been thrust on her. Offers, secret and open, had been made to her and she had passed them by. Favoured by her isolated mode of life, assaults of the more brutal kind had been made upon her robust virtue. Her splendid physical strength had prevailed for the shaming of rustic satyrs even as her shrewd North-country tongue had daunted lovers of less brutal kind. She had never known fear of one of these, or sensed the possibility of mastery in any, until her path was crossed by the man Mackilliveray.

A powerful, rough and silent man, almost handsome in his bovine fashion. His talk, thickened with the Newport burr, and somewhat akin to the dialect of her own Leckley district, had come to her ears like the burden of some half-forgotten song.

Very soon after that night at 'The Pure Drop,' when Braby,—tramping homeward to the wheatacres, to break by his unannounced return, the silence of eleven years!—had crossed the familiar stepping-stones that led to the village tavern, the womanly intuition of Malvina had shown her the danger in her way. A reckless and a desperate man when roused, was her judgment on the navigator—capable of unscrupulous action, and violence to enforce his will. His early approaches she had rebuffed with a directness that baffled his coarseness; a dignity that wakened in his breast some faint stirrings of respect.

The check was temporary. The sluggish brain working behind those red-veined eyes that followed her was capable of subtlety in the pursuit of its owner's desires. Finding no easy conquest here, Mackilliveray altered his tactics. His court was now to Braby, whom he met at the tap o' nights.

The plan forming behind the light pale eyes and under the scarlet hair-thatch, was neither especially clever nor particularly new. He plied Braby freely with liquor, lost small silver to him over cards and wagers, listened wil-

lingly to his bragging talk, and grinned at his fouler jokes.

As their boon-companionship increased, Braby brought him to the cottage. His wife was glad of an errand that excused her absence then. Next time he came she would have gone out—but a snarl from Braby checked her. What did she want to be gadding for? Let her stop under her husband's roof.

"Eh, the men!" thought Malvina as she took her besom from its place beside the shallow doorstep, beat the birch-twigs clean against the garden-fence, and began to sweep out the shed.

"Missus!" A heavy voice had spoken, and a big form blocked the doorway. "I'd 'counted none on drivin' on ye ouden yer oan home. Your man he've med me welcome enough, but the man's welcome's a poor one, when the gradely lass he's married on is dour wi' ye an' mum."

"I be no lass," she said with scorn. "Look for 'em wheer yo'll find 'em."

"I cannawt see no woman's face," said Mackilliveray, "sin' I looked on yourn! An' Burn my eyes if I wants to! Now I ha' spoke my mind out. Good arternoon to ye, Missus."

With this rough salutation he was gone.

"Men!" said Malvina, besoming till the dust and leaves and rubbish rolled out of the door of the wood-shed in an almost solid cloud. But she went to the darker end of the shed to redd up the dwindling woodpile, and laid her face in her two hands, and cried in the shadows there.

Then she dried the eyes that had shed hot tears for pity of Malvina Braby.

She felt some pity mingled with scorn for the man who had gone away. "Th' brassy chap! Makin' up sheep's eyes at a wisht owd married woman. . . . Eh—the man!" she said with contempt of the madness of Mackilliveray, oddly mingled with contempt of the faded wife—herself.

For the heyday of her beauty was over. Her glorious hair was less glossy, the curves of her throat and bosom and hips were less sumptuous than they had been. There were even faint lines about her eyes and mouth, and the

texture of her skin was coarser, that had had the rosy-amber glow and smoothness of a nectarine.

The wasps had got at the nectarine and ravaged its juicy ripeness. Troubles had thronged upon troubles, fretting both body and soul. Labour and sorrow and loneliness, want and hard words and ill-usage, had stripped the glory of youth from her, and hastened the coming of age.

"Men! . . ." she said as she banged her broom on the doorpost of the woodshed, and shut her lips on things unsaid, which the single word conveyed. Too simple of soul for irony, she could yet appreciate grimness, which after the fashion of her simple type she expressed by the word 'queer.'

'Twas unod'ny queer that in Braby, fits of amorousness alternated with indifference, or outbreaks of furious anger that endangered its object's life.

That Mackilliveray should covet, with such frenzy of desire, that which was held so cheaply by its owner, was not only queer, but a clinching proof of the unreasonableness of men!

Did Braby suspect his boon-fellow of dogging his wife's footsteps? Did he guess at the passion that had wrung that blundering avowal from the man? When she shut her eyes she could see him, stammering and scowling in the doorway,—the red hair on his forehead clotted with sweat, like an over-driven bull's.

Should her Master ever learn what had set in those pale eyes that strange uncanny glower, and made those thick and calloused hands tremble like a palsied man's, would Braby laugh his jarring laugh, or be angered like a decent husband? He would have been wild with anger once, but now she did not know. . . .

Mackilliveray was gone, at last, and that was matter for thankfulness. He had lost her her place with his glowering, and set Tolleymead gossips agog. Gone, and for good! Well, if it were true! but something in the manner of his departure, following on her last rebuff, was sinister and 'queer.'

The ruthless strength she had sensed in him made her

doubtful of his yielding. She felt there was something lurking behind his open abandonment of the chase. If beaten, he would have slunk away. The message sent by Stephen heralded another move on his part, towards the gaining of his unacknowledged end.

She was simple and pure as those women of old who followed the Teacher of Nazareth. She had trodden her thorn-beset pathway alone, and never been tempted aside. The strength of her arm and the truth of her heart had cowed many a would-be seducer, and the tricks of lewd bachelors and blacksliding wives were abhorrent in the sight of her eyes.

She looked down on Mackilliveray as a 'brazen-faced chap' who paid court to the wife of another. She knew relief at his going and hoped he would never come back! And yet she had thrilled at the clumsy tale his stammering lips had told her. A wisht woman, an ill-used wife with thirty-four years to her burden. . . . It had been balm to the ache of her pride to know herself still desired!

19

It was a clear and windless day, cold, but no longer frosty. Even warm and genial for a day in middle January. The smoke-brown woods, their uniform hue broken here and there by larches, walled in a vast and flattish tract of arable and pasture-land.

At the bottom of the garden was a dry grass-dyke, banked high on the side next the wheatlands. The end of the dyke nearest the house terminated in a deep field-drain. The gulley that snored at her back door carried, by its rusty length of piping, the suds from Malvina's wash-tub and the rinsings from Malvina's sink to this accommodating drain. Deep and wet at the bottom, even in drougthy weather, and covered at the sides with herbage, starred with yellow fritillary in June, the field-drain accompanied the right-of-way across the sixty-acre; ending in the strip of woodland that ran beside the Great North Road.

A hazel coppice clothed the bank at the bottom of the

little garden. Halfway up the bank on the garden-side was the stump of an ancient oak. Under its roots was a badger-hole that harboured a pair of foxes. Tufts of bloodstained feathers and fur sometimes hung on brambles near the hole.

Malvina, to whom the creatures of the fields were dear, would remove such damning traces, burning them in her cooking-fire, or burying them beneath dead leaves. Peeping on dark dawns, or moonless nights from the sideward window of the dwelling-room, she would see a slender dog-like shape on the ancient oak-tree stump.

Then the lost dimple that Stephen mourned would show in her cheek's thinned oval,—the old humour would quirk the corners of her deep-cut lips, and she would laugh to herself. And though the mouse that nibbled crumbs by the hearth would not heed, even though it heard her, yet the brush-tailed watcher on the oak-stump blotted into shadow at the sound. . . .

Malvina laughed, and yet she knew that in the middle of the night that followed, or at the dark hour heralding the dawn of another day, there would be quackings or squawkings in some farmer's duck-pen or poultry-house, and that tufts of bloodstained plumage caught amongst the brambles, would indicate to the seeing eye, the road to the murderer's den. . . .

Integrity has its breaking-point. That upright soul, Malvina, who would have died rather than shield human dishonesty, would take a rake and cover up the trail of the four-footed brigand. This day, when she went forth from her house to breathe air untainted by Haybitt, as she crossed the dyke and mounted the bank, and passed through the hazel-copse, she stooped and picked a tuft of snow-white down from a bramble that crossed her pathway, and put it in her pocket, meaning to burn it later on. And the round black eyes of a robin that stood neck-deep in the chilly rain-water that filled a hollow on the top of the decaying stump of the oak, exchanged with hers the confident look of perfect understanding that passes between the creature and the human who only loves it enough.

The object of her motherly search came in sight when she was halfway across the wheatacres. To her left, within a temporary enclosure of posts and wire and hurdles, a parcel of young wethers had been folded down to fatten on a patch of swedes.

The sheep, of the hornless Romney Marsh breed, with white legs and mild white faces, had eaten the green tops down to the ground, in the earlier part of the day. Now they had been driven into the sheltered end of the fold, and barricaded there with hurdles, while their shepherd dug up the swedes with a fork, amidst the baaing of the hungry mob. Outside the sheepfold gate stood the wheelbarrow in which he had brought the extra hurdles. His dinner-basket lay in the barrow, with the jacket he had thrown off.

Stephen was helping the shepherd at his job, picking up the swedes and carrying them to the barricaded corner where the woolly captives huddled, crying to be released. He looked busy and cheerful, and very much a boy, as he tipped the heaping armfuls in amongst the greedy, crowding creatures, and grinned at the sight of the scramble that ensued.

"Yo're late at work," Malvina said, "seein' as it be a half-day."

"Mr. May he gi' me th' job," explained Stephen, referring to their employer. "An' I'm to have another eighteenpence to-week for helpin' Tom Pover wi' the shepherdin'. An' Tom Pover says that's more nor he got when he were risin' fourteen. An——"

"An' you'll hev' him making up to the girls next thing," said Tom, who was Pover's eldest. "An' walkin' out wi' 'em on Sundays, in a coat wi' tails an' a—wh—whoy!"

He broke off to dodge a rotten swede hurled by the victim of his pleasantry, and then went on in his characteristic vein of circumlocutory wit:

"Since we sawed you at the Farm this mornin', Mrs. Braby, there's been a loss to the community. Nor I wouldn't be surprised, if when Monday comes, you find the Mistress in her grumps."

The 'grumps' meant the sulks, in the homely but forcible

phraseology of Tolleymead, where the temper of the mistress of the Dairy was known, and discussed as the weather might be.

“Med-be one o’ th’ White Spanish hens ha’ got lost?” guessed Malvina, internally certain.

“You’ve hit it. The plump little pullet that’s always a-flying th’ pen. Mrs. May she had a terrible handful of a chase wi’ her on’y the day before yes’day; an’ this mornin’ when she carried ’em down the breakfast scraps that plump little pullet warn’t there. An’ so Father—when he goes to git some clover-hay for the calves—finds her pore head lyin’ under th’ haystack. Bit off as clean as a whistle,” said Tom, ending with a touch of pathos; “an’ cheek-be-jowl wi’ the last egg she’ll ever lay in th’ world.”

Guilty knowledge of the bit of bloodstained white fluff in her pocket checked Malvina’s utterance.

“Dun yo’ reckon as ’twer——”

“The fox, sure enough!” agreed Tom, finishing his digging, wiping his fork, after cleaning his boots on it, and beginning to pull up the hurdles. “Wi’-out fear of God or man, you might say, a four-legged varmint need be,—as to go and do a thing like that in the very face o’ day!”

“Would he come fro’ a goodish ways off, should yo’ say?” asked Malvina, shocked at her own artfulness.

“Mr. May he’s sartain sure he do,” said Tom, who admired Mr. May. “Mr. May he’ve marked all the burrers about here, an’ he knows every one o’ th’ foxes. . . . An’ he says this be a big, old, wise dog-fox, as be far too well knowed in his own parts, an’ ha’ got to travel ten mile a night fur to git his bellyful! An’ when he cotched that Spaniard hen, he made a bumping meal off her, an’ he’ll lay up snug, an’ sleep till dark, an’ then pint his noase for home. There’s a hole he’ve dug under th’ laurel-hedge where yon bit o’ woodlan’ jines it,” went on Tom, pointing to the belt of ash and oak that ran by the Great North Road, “an’ there he’ll find a gin-trap set, and some bits o’ pisened liver, in case he takes it in his head to try his luck again afore he goes!”

“’Tis wonnerful,” sighed the false Malvina, “what Mr. May do know about th’ critturs!”

"You're right there, missus," agreed Tom, piling the hurdles on a barrow and pulling on his coat.

"An' 'tis bad about th' hen," said Malvina, "when she'd just begunned to lay so well."

"She's no more chanst to keep her head," said Tom, "wi' a clever fox like that 'un,—than I used t' have ten year agone, when you'd pluck me cap off me own. An' hitch it over a wall you would!—or a hedge—or a house fur that matter!"

"Eh!—I wanna do they fool things no more. I were young i' them days!"

"Father'd say," returned Tom, with a twinklè in his eye, "that no woman be ever too old to do what she makes up her mind she will do!"

"An' there binna' no more knowledgeabler man as I knows on, nor Thomas Pover," said Malvina, who numbered the ploughman and his wife on her scanty list of friends. "How bin' yo'r mother wi' her swole-up knee?"

"'Tis easier for the rubbin'," said Tom. "She says you've witchcraft in yer hands, an' spelled her pains away. But you've not bin nigh us for a long time, Mrs. Braby—that you haven't."

"No more I hanna. I'll look in when I gets a chance. Good afternoon to yo'!"

"Arternoon!" said Tom, pulling on his coat, and pad-locking the fold-gate. "There's no more work for ye now, Stevey-wag, so you'd better cut yer stick. An' as for what you asked me to rummage out,—ye can come over to-night an' fetch it."

"What wer' yo' to fetch from Tom's to-night?" asked Malvina as they turned towards home.

"Nowhat partic'ler!" Stephen blushed, and she sickened with foreboding. He was beginning to have secrets of his own. "Eh, dear, the men!—the men!"

Presently through the rugged simplicity of his life would run a strip of darker colour, as the rank green herbage of the field-drain, that she called a 'let,' barred the hedgehog-coloured stubbles by the path.

As she looked at the tops of the tall rank weeds, she saw that they were waving. Yes, though there was no

wind to stir them. Something was moving below. As the sound of her footsteps and her boy's drew near, the weed-tops left off wagging. The unseen traveller was lying stone-still, until they should have gone by. And a whiff of a rank and musky kind stole to her acquainted nostrils,—the kind of whiff that makes a seasoned hound throw up his head and give tongue. She paused as though to scan some point of interest in the distance, and said deliberately and distinctly, as Stephen halted too:

“If I were a cunnin’ old grey Fox, as had ate a young white Spaniard pullet,—an’ framed to have another bird out o’ th’ same pen,—I’d ha’ better wits than risk myseln where th’ master’s laid a gin-trap, an’ strowed bits o’ pisened liver about to tempt me,—that I would!”

She saw Stephen about to interrupt, and touched his lips for silence. Together they waited, while the bleating from the fold came out of the distance behind.

Then the pressure of Malvina’s fingers on Stephen’s mouth slackened, and she smiled at him, and the deep dimple of their happy days showed in her left cheek. For the tops of the weeds were wagging again—but in the opposite direction. The raider had taken the warning and turned his nose for home.

“Mother, do you reckon as that fox as has his hole in th’ dyke at th’ bottom of our garden be th’ one as stole Mrs. May’s white hen?” said Stephen with dancing eyes. “An’ as that were him, cropin’ down the drain, an’ he heard ye, and changed his mind-like?”

“What isna’ told canna’ be knowed,” said Malvina, teasingly.

“You’re a fair Masterpiece, that’s what you be!” said Stephen, bubbling with admiration.

“Ay, an’ yet yo’ won’t tell me, what like o’ thing yo’re to fetch from Tom’s to-night!”

Stephen made no answer. His eye dulled and his under-jaw projected. He looked sullen and obstinate, and so sheepish, that the bleating from the fold behind him might have been his natural voice. And the dimple died out of Malvina’s cheek, and the quirks at the corners of her lips straightened into sternness. Even as the red thief who

harboured under the oak-stump at the bottom of her garden, moved under the screen of the grasses and weeds in the water that told no tales, so her son would move, in the fulness of time, where interest or appetite beckoned—and no one would blame him for keeping his doings from his mother, she knew!

One law for the men, she thought to herself, and All the laws for the women! Women shackled and men free, would it always be the same?

She looked sidewise at Stephen's fair, curly head, and alert, intelligent profile. The clear red and white of his wholesome skin, dusted with golden freckles, the black-lashed eyes of vivid blue were a well-looking boy's now. He was thin because he was poorly fed, but there was plenty of bone in him. And what flesh he carried was hard and tough, as the timber of a young oak tree.

When the hardy boy should become a man, strong and self-willed and handsome, asked the pitiless voice that nagged at her ear, what sort of man would he be? Would the Braby blood in him overcome the strain derived from his mother? Would she find in him the son of her hopes, or the son of her secret fears? . . .

Now he said, his blue eyes ranging over the wide expanse of the wheatlands, banded with the brown furrows left by the plough along the northern hedge, and silver-grey where the stubbles began—and so on till the line of the field-drain beyond and the rutted cart-track, and the right-of-way, made a narrow streak of vivid green next a stripe of dirty white:

“Mother, if this wer' a Market-ground, wi' acres o' flowers growin' and houses an' houses of shinin' glass, wouldn't it just be grand?”

“Ay, an' supposen the apple-trees bore apples o' gold an' silver, an' the goose-gogs, curran's an' rasps on th' bushes were emeral's an' rubies!” she chid. “An' the sky came down low so as us could catch larks—an' the pigs ran about ready-roasted, wi' knives an' forks a-stickin' in the cracklin' on their backs. What ha' th' farmer done t' yo', lad, as yo'd rob 'un of his livin'?”

“Nothin', an' I wouldn't take it. I was on'y thinkin'

a bit . . . Mother! . . . What like is it inside them gates as they've got to the drive at Brabycott? Why ha' you allus told me I mus'n' ever go there?"

"What like is it beyon' the gates?" She was not chilled by the question, asked her at intervals by Stephen since his sixth or seventh year. "Gardens an' stables an' th' big House. Home-farm an' park an' paddocks. Plough an' medder, an' pasture-land—an' theer yo' have it all! Once, when I'd been married scarcelins a year, I walked theer wi' yo'r Father. On a summer night, wi' a big bright moon, an' the air smellin' sweet wi' hay. An' I thowt to myseln, grand as it were;—If I'd to choose betwixt th' cottage wi' my man—an' th' girt big House wi'out him,—I'd fare to take th' cottage an' th' man, an' let the big House go!"

She stopped, for the unforgotten scene rose up before her clearly. An avenue of chestnut-trees, their bloom not fallen yet. A long flagged terrace with a sunken wall, and an ancient house, shaped like an **L** of red brick, faced with freestone; its many windows black as pitch, or winking at the moon.

Would that it had lain in ashes then! Would that the banks that held the wicked money had broken, and that the lands to the last half-acre had been auctioned and parted away. It was a queer, uncanny place, and had been the ruin of the father. What if a day should come when it should prove the ruin of the son?

What was he saying, in the boyish voice that sounded stronger and older, in keeping with the purposeful, resolute look on the handsome fair young face!

"Mother, I wants to see Brabycott. You've held out as I'm never to go theer. But 'tis said as Mr. Grundall be growin' there all manner o' stuff for the Markets, an' Crunch an' Todd, from Tolleymead, be two o' th' new gardeners took on."

"If th' truth wer' told o' Grundall," returned Malvina in her forthright fashion, "he've bin' croppin' th' lands an' garden-grounds o' Brabycott fur thirteen year. 'Tisn' two year sin' he bought th' place, or was told of as havin' bought it. Go an' look at it fur yo'rself sin' yo' keeps on

a hankerin' an' hankerin'. 'Tis plain yo'r mother's wishen's be nought to yo' no more."

He looked at her, and she read in his blue eyes that he would not disobey her. Once again she had conquered through the strength of her indomitable will. But her knees shook and her stout heart quailed and her soul fainted within her, and she was fain, to her own surprise, to sit down on the boundary-stone.

20

The boundary-stone, marking some ancient right or liberty of the Parish, had stood within the memory of the oldest folks by the cart-track that ran with the field-path, perhaps a quarter of a mile from the Braby's two-roomed house. A block of weathered granite, its angles rounded by contact with the more reposeful surfaces of human anatomy. Courting couples inevitably gravitated towards the boundary-stone. If you sat down and held on to your girl, there was just enough room for two. Fagged labouring-men would sit on the stone to light a pipe as they went homewards, and mothers or wives, carrying dinners afield, would halt there for a rest.

"An' joy go wi' yo'!" Malvina said, sighing as she seated herself. "Th' Lord He knows th' sorrow as that place ha' brung to me!" But she did not discourage Stephen's arm round her waist, as he perched on the stone beside her, because unless one of them held on, there was really not room for two. . . .

"But, Mother," he began, knitting his fair brows and crinkling his black-lashed eyelids, as always when he was earnest over what he had to say: "If that ther' Will hadn' got lost, Brabycott 'ud belong to us. Wouldn' it, Mother?"

A curious faintness she had felt of late came creeping over her, and for a moment the landscape spun, and she swayed as though about to fall. An iron hand seemed to close about her heart, and the power of speech failed her. The afternoon sun, moving to the west, threw their intermingled shadows far beyond them. . . . But a blacker shadow had fallen on her, and blotted out her one last

hope. The thing she had dreaded had come to pass. . . . Then, as Stephen's voice called her, and his hand touched the hands that lay frozen in her lap, she heard herself crying to him:

"My boy, my boy! yo' dunnot know what 'tis as yo' be sayin'!"

"Why, Mother, what's th' matter?" he cried. "You looks at me so queer!"

She mastered her mouth that was twisted and wrung with the gall that brimmed her chalice, and mustered all the strength she had, that she might plead with him:

"Never heed my looks. If yo'd but have seed what yo'r Father were before he went to London, yo'd gag at the thought o' that money—as have made him what yo' sees him now!"

"Tain't th' money," asserted Stephen. "'Tis the wantin' of th' money."

"It binna! His sister Ann she had it, and what did it bring to she? An' his father had it, as got it from his own father as made it—th' Lord's his judge if iver brass wer' made in a wickeder way! Eh! whether 'em has it an' keeps it, or whether 'em hanna' it an' wants it—that money ha' bin to th' Brabys what fluke be i' th' sheep!"

"Mother, how did they git it?"

"How——" Yes, he should hear the story—this boy who was so like her in feature, but whose mind might be as alien from hers as the North is from the South. "'Tis hard for me to tell yo', bein' an onlearned woman, nor niver havin' book-lear' beyond th' Testament. Yet it mun be along o' this—things I ha' heerd I clings to! An' this yo'r Father telled me afore him an' me wer' wed. Fur I wer' livin' wi' people as I could bide no longer; an' he took me to a decent lodgin' kep' by a decent soul. An' theer I bode till he married me, by licence," said Malvina—"the axins takin' a power o' time for puttin' up i' Church."

"Ay, Mother, but th' money?" Stephen's eyes shone bright as sapphires.

"Ay, yea, th' money! that be th' Braby's song. But yo'r Father hated the word o' it—an' me laughin' to hear him say so, he telled me the way 'twas gotten," said Mal-

vina—"an' then I laughed no more. Have yo' iver heerd of a wicked Trade as Government ha' stopped now, as was drove by ships from London Docks, an' Bristol, an' Lancaster an' Liverpool,—an' wer' called by folks Th' Slave Trade?—Think hard afore yo' answers!"

The bright blue eyes hers questioned had at first no answer in them. Then Stephen remembered something he had read in a book that had been his father's. In *The Lives, Crimes and Exploits of Celebrated Buccaneers and Sea Rovers*, there were brief, occasional references to Slave-Ships taken at sea. . . .

He nodded, wrinkling his forehead in the effort to remember. . . .

"Sellin' o' Black Men—that 'ud be tradin' in Slaves, wouldn' it? You showed me a Black Man onst," said Stephen, "along of a Menaggery. An' he were an ugly feller enough. Be all Black Men like that 'un?"

She did not immediately answer. A bird had alighted on the muddy path a little distance away. As it pecked at the ground in search of food she slipped her hand in her pocket, and brought out a fragment of bread, reserved from some scanty meal of her own.

"Black folks be ugly, yo' reckon. Eh, but I'll show yo'! Here, Pretty!"

The blackbird heard. It hopped farther away.

"Pretty, Pretty, Pretty!" called Malvina, crumbling bread between her fingers.

"He'll never come," affirmed Stephen. "Theer's no coaxin' any bird so shy as th' blackbird be."

"Come then, my Pretty-Pretty!" called Malvina, scattering bread-crumbs.

The blackbird hopped still farther away, and then hopped back at an angle from which it was possible to scan the humans seated on the stone.

"While he doesn' cry 'chack' I've hopes o' him," said Malvina. "Keep yo' quiet. . . . Pretty! Pretty!"

The blackbird hopped a little nearer with its bright eye fixed on her. Round the black bright eye was a tawny-yellow ring, matching its beak in colour, and its plumage

was black as ebony, or unpolished black coral, or bog-oak. . . . Its slender, powerful, elegant shape seemed framed for grace and swiftness, and its slim, strong legs might have been wrought of delicately-blackened steel. And though, like the robin, its lustrous glance confidently met Malvina's, its trust in her was counterpoised by its keen suspicion of the boy. . . . Yet it came to her feet and took of the crumbs with delicate sharp-set eagerness, as though of late its table had been a meagre one.

"Yo've a pretty brown wife, my pretty Black Man," said Malvina, smiling as she watched him. "I'll frame to lay a penny as she's upping proud o' yo'. An' if village lads should lime yo', would yo' break yo'r heart wi' frettin', or learn to sing wi' rusty wires betwixt yo' an' the free air?"

"Mother——" began Stephen, but with the word the blackbird's courage failed him. Those boys! . . . He seized the biggest bit within reach, and flew, chacking, across the fields.

"Mother, didn' folks get mortal rich by sellin' black men and women?"

Malvina answered:

"Mortal rich. For black men an' women, an' boys an' girls, an' sucklin's—they'd bring their prices, when they come trampin' down in gangs from th' places wheer they wer' trapped or sold. Fur they was sold in droves like hogs, or stood in th' markets an' bid fur. By Christians as believed—in them bad old days—they'd no right to their bodies nor their souls!"

The bright eyes fixed upon her face had a dawning of horror in them. Her sick heart lifted on a wave of hope that gave her courage to go on.

"They'd done no wrong, as th' Lord had made them Black, an' set 'em in their country; an' if they prayed to stocks an' stones, 'twas all the prayin' they knowed. They lived on corn an' milk, an' fruit, an' meat they cooked in th' sunshine; it being so powerful hot in them parts, they didn' need no cloes. But—in th' Furtherest Places—by-times they'd ate each other—an' then they'd roast the corpse, an' keep its teeth an' hair for charms."

“Cannerbils. I’ve heerd on ’em!” said Stephen, with a sigh of rapture. “Theer’s a pictur’ in *Robinson Crusoe* of ’em dancin’ round a Fire.”

“Cannerbils let call ’em who may choose. The men as hunted an’ trapped ’em, or bought ’em from their Kings in droves fur Calico Prints, an’ brass Rings,—an’ sold ’em to the Slave-merchants as sent the ships, fur thousands o’ silver dollars, to be shipped to the West Injies an’ sold again fur ten times th’ money paid! them an’ th’ Dealers as traded wi’ ’em,” said Malvina, “was worse nor Cannerbils. I’d rather set down wi’ a Cannerbil nor I would wi’ one o’ they!”

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She brushed from her broad forehead with the back of her hand some drops that had started upon it. In that instant Stephen noticed for the first time that her hair was streaked with grey.

“I mun tell yo’ theer be Noblemen in this here land as got their riches from Slavery. I cannawt tell how they looks on it. . . . ’Twould seem Disgrace to me. . . . Yo’r great-grandfather were a Liverpool man as owned Slave-ships. Ay, an’ sailed ’em!”

Stephen’s eyes were blazing now, and his eager lips were apart.

“Me bein’ an ignorant woman, I cannawt put it Book-like. But when yo’r gran’father were i’ his cups—as he drank regular an’ stiddy!—he’d tell these tales to his daughter Miss Ann, an’ fright his poor weakly wife wi’ ’em,—an’ she telled ’em to Susan Parmint—an’ yo’r Father he had ’em from she! Braby’s ships ’ud sail fro’ Liverpool, laded wi’ goods from Brummagem an’ Cotton Prints from Manchester, for them Ports of the Blacks’ country. For Guinea Land they laid their hellums, an’ Guinea is in Africa. An’ the Grain Coast an’ the Ivory Coast, an’ the Gold Coast, an’ the Slave Coast—is where the traders got their wealth—but most came from Slavery.”

Stephen listened, drinking in the halting sentences of the story. Her words had no grace or eloquence, but her great sad eyes and her tragic mouth lent it pathos and

mystery. . . . She went on, in her full rich tones, as the keen breeze dropped towards sunset, and the birds that were busy on the new-ploughed lands made the last meal of the day.

“Theer be two Rivers on th’ Slave Coast as falls into th’ salt water. Bonny be th’ name o’ one, th’ other I ha’ forgot. Theer’s a town by the name o’ Bonny too, standin’ in the swamp by th’ river, full o’ prisons called Calabooses wheer th’ traders kep’ th’ Slaves. An’ ’acause th’ town o’ Bonny were ate up wi’ Fever an’ Ague, the white Slave merchants and Slave-hunters, when they’d come to meet th’ Slaver Ships, bided in flat-boats such as yo’d see on our canals an’ rivers, moored in th’ current, out o’ reach o’ th’ poison fro’ th’ swamps.”

“An’ the Black folks?” inquired Stephen.

“The Black folks as kep’ comin’ down in Chain-gangs from th’ back-lands—druv’ by men as rode a-horseback an’ carried pistols an’ loaded whips!—they lived—or Died when they couldn’ live—in the Calaboose,” said Malvina; “th’ town o’ Bonny by th’ Bonny being a Slave-town, built fur slaves. An’ th’ Captains o’ th’ Slave-ships as were anchored at th’ mouth o’ th’ river, they’d come rowing up in their galleys wi’ twenty men at the oars. An’ they’d climb aboard the flat-boats, where the long cane chairs ’ud be ready for ’em, and the black-boys as served the Slave-merchants ’ud bring ’em iced punch an’ cigars. A free, wild, wicked life they lived. Drinkin’ an’ gamblin’ and smokin’. Chaffering an’ bargaining an’ gathering gold. Eh, th’ folly o’ men!”

“An’ ’tis all stopped now? You said so.”

“Thank th’ Lord, as even in they bad days there were men as cried Shame upon th’ Slave Trade! It took twenty year, yo’r Father said, to stop it, but stopped it wer’! A day come when fur an’ Englishman to have meddlins wi’ that wickedness wer’ punished by Transportation, ’cordin’ to English Law.”

“An’ they all quit off a-doin’ it?”

“A goodish few on ’em quit it. But Braby an’ Braby wer’ one o’ th’ Firms as kep’ to th’ game on th’ sly. Plague and Pestilence they’d broke out among the slaves on th’

West Injy Islands, an' the Planters as growed of the Sugar-cane was biddin' fur more an' more. I mind that bit special, fur niver havin' heerd afore o' Sugar growin' in sugar-canes," said Malvina, and fell silent for so long a time that Stephen jogged her for more.

"You bain't goin' to stop wi'out tellin' th' rest. 'Twouldn' be fair!" he whimpered.

"'Tis dimmin' fur Dark," said Malvina, "an' th' wind be carryin' snow. An' 'tis queer, but through talkin' o' they Islands, I a'most framed to see 'em. Wi' th' hot Sun a-shinin' on th' Cocoa-nut trees, an' th' flowers all manner o' colours, like th' birdies your Father told about, as be nigh so bright as they. An' th' rows o' sheds in th' Plantations, full o' Black men an' women an' children, dyin' o' the Pest like lung-sick sheep—an' their Masters callin' fur more! An' th' Slave-ships hurryin' from Guinea, as loaded wi' Slaves fur th' Planters, as they wer' Packed like peas in a maund, wi' scarcelins air to breathe. Chained down in rows to the Planks o' th' ship, an' the Dead taken out i' th' mornin's—or chopped out wi' axes yo'r Father said; an' pitched to the Sharks in th' Sea!"

Stephen was huddling close to her now.

"Such Fever brewed in th' crowded Holds o' th' Slave-ships," went on Malvina, "that th' broadly men as passed through th' rows givin' 'em their water an' meal—'ud be stricken with it sudden-like an' drop down among 'em, an' be Fetched out dyin' by their comrades if so be they werena' dead. Pest to pest; the pest-ships carryin' Pestilence to th' plague-smitten Islands. Eh, eh! Merciful Lord, th' naughtiness o' men!"

Stephen, with his head in the old safe place, and her strong arm thrown around him, butted her in rather a calf-like way, to signify that he wanted more.

"They whistled for Wind, yo' may be sure," said Malvina, "with their Cargo spoilin': an' maybe an English Cruiser followin' hot behind. . . . Ther' wer' what be called Prize Money to be paid to th' officers an' men o' th' Cruisers,—if so be they run down o' th' Slave-ships at sea, full up wi' their cargo o' Blacks. So they'd let 'em git started afore they'd give Chase——"

Stephen squirmed with increasing excitement.

“An’ the smartest o’ th’ Slave Captains ’ud gi’ ’em th’ slip. . . . One o’ they clever Captains wer’ Braby.”

Stephen lay as still as a mouse.

“Did yo’ hear me?”

Stephen nodded.

“That there Braby wer’ yo’r great-gran’father, the second partner in th’ Firm. A family man wi’ three growed-up sons, an’ a wife as wouldn’ live wi’ ’im. Her blood wer’ turned wi’ th’ wickedness o’ th’ man, an’ her gorge riz at his very sight.”

The arm round Stephen tightened till it hurt him. Then the pressure slackened and Malvina went on:

“She’d gone forth of his house wi’ her penny that she’d had when her an’ him wer’ first wedded. An’—though Captain George Braby were a wealthy man,—her younger sons went too. Josiah an’ Amos they was named—an’ the eldest o’ th’ three as was yo’r gran’father—he sailed wi’ Captain Braby on th’ Slave-ship as cargo-clerk.¹ ’Tis mortal queer as there ’ud be clerks aboard ships,” said Stephen’s mother wonderingly, “but this wer’ a cargo such as never they’d clapped under hatches till then. Th’ last an’ th’ biggest venture afore Braby gin’ up th’ Slave Trade. Maybe he thought as his wife an’ his sons ’ud come back once he quit it fur good.”

Her rude but heartfelt eloquence and the deep music of her rich contralto lent to the musty wickedness of dead-and-gone Brabys a living thrill of horror that passed into Stephen’s blood. Grim tragedy was in the air. He sensed it as he shuddered, hoping the story would frighten him, and wishing that it mightn’t.

“They got th’ Slaves stowed about the ship,” said his mother, “in the Fore Hold an’ th’ After Hold, though I’m no-ways clear in my head-like what Holds an’ Hatches means. An’ they stowed ’em in th’ Twin-decks an’ they stowed ’em on the Main decks, wi’ iron fetters on their arms an’ legs, an’ then they Put to Sea. They looked to ther’ sails fur to Carry ’em—havin’ no Steamships in they days; an’ whatever else yo’r great-gran’father were, he

¹ She meant supercargo’s clerk, possibly.

were Seaman through an' through! He were chased by two Cruisers, an' outspanked 'em till they gin up th' chase as no good on!—an' when th' Wind fell to a Dead Callum, it nobbut vexed him a bit. He cursed an' swore an' fumed fur a whiles, an' then clapped hisseln down in his Cabin, an' sent fur two out o' his five Mates t' drink an' smoke wi' 'im."

Stephen wriggled with sheer delight. Malvina went on slowly:

"Th' other Ship's Mates they stopped on Deck keepin' an' eye on th' Weather, an' readyin' to clap on ivery Sail as soon as th' Wind 'ud blow. . . . Then one on 'em as had bin scannin' wi' his glass, he come runnin' down to Cap'n Braby's cabin wi' his eyes a-starin' out on his head, an' his face as white as curd. For they'd give two o' they Government Cruisers th' slip, but Another wer' showin' ahead on 'em: small i' th' distance as a fly on a pane, but movin' wi' th' drift o' th' tide!"

Stephen could see a white-faced man with great gold earrings in his ears, and bushy jet-black whiskers, bursting into the cabin where the Captain and his mates sat over their cigars and rum.

"Th' wind it got up, but what use o' th' wind but to hurry th' chasers behind 'em,—an' to carry 'em down on the other, as wer' makin' ready wi' her guns! So they took th' bags of gold dollars as Braby kep' in his cabin, an' sank th' ship's books wi' a weight to 'em, an' took to the ship's Boats. One white man wer' missin', an' who wer' that man, would yo' ask me? Yo'r gran'-father Geoffrey Braby, as served as second Cargo Clerk. An' they put off wi'out him, an' layed-to a while, on their Rowers, until they seed him come up on th' Deck."

Stephen knew his grandfather couldn't have been burned or drowned, being buried in Tolleymead Churchyard, in the Vault that hadn't been opened since,—even when his Aunt Ann had died.

"He'd a little light boat, like th' Black folks use, as wer' worked wi' a Paddle," said Malvina, "an' he lowered it an' follered it an' got in, an' Paddled after the boats.

An' they took him into th' Cap'n's boat, an' Rowed away over th' Water——"

"Leavin' the Black men an' women behind?" asked Stephen, feeling chilly down the back.

"Black men an' women an' childern too. Packed like herrin's in a barril. An' th' Sun sank down an' it wer' Night. But th' Night wer' nigh as bright as th' day."

"How then?"

"With th' light o' th' Slave-ship as Braby's son had set Fire to afore he left her. All had bin 'ranged fur burnin' her, before they sailed fro' Guinea,—wi' barrils o' taller an' tar an' oil, an' fuses ready to ketch. An' when th' Fire reached th' kegs o' spirits as they'd aboard, accordin' to yo'r Father," said Malvina, "th' Slave-ship were burned down to th' edge o' th' sea 'fore th' Cruiser got to her."

"An' th' Black folks wi' her?" gasped Stephen.

"Burned alive. Twelve hundred souls as th' Redeemer died fur. An' Braby an' his son, an' th' mates wi' them, played cards by th' light o' th' fire. They sang an' cut jokes an' made merry as they rowed over them shinin' waters, an' ate an' drank, fur th' boats wer' Stored wi' iverything they might need. An' they histed their sails when the wind blowed, an' got them safe to an Island. . . . They'd bin paid aforehand—as they allus wer',—an' Braby he quit th' sea. He fared to be rich on what he'd made," said Malvina bitterly and grimly. "An' he bought th' Cott Hall Estate and changed th' name to Braby-cott. But th' cry as went up fro' that Ship will sound until th' Day o' Judgment. An' who covets th' House or th' Money, or th' Land—covets th' price of blood!"

Strange that the story, bald of detail, inevitably vague as to place-names, and hampered by the ignorance of the narrator, had power to thrill the boy.

Void of colour, glamour and mystery, yet Stephen found the story enthralling. Sprung from a germ that had harboured in the loins of Geoffrey Braby, he saw more than Malvina pictured, and realized more than she knew.

Reef, beach, creek and cay lay outspread before him, under skies as yellow as brass or skies of blazing blue.

Palm-grove, jungle and mangrove-swamp with crocodiles sweltering on the margin. Flocks of parrots of rainbow hues, and monkeys chattering in the trees.

Exquisite scents on the tropical breeze. Smells that were musky and putrid. Fogs on the tidal rivers, miasmas crawling on the land.

A Slave-town built by Slaves for Slaves on the eastward bank of the river. Quays where the ship's-boats waited, rocking on the treacly tide. Stages of planks, upholding rows of sheds, built of canes and roofed with plantain-leaves. Negroes chained to iron bars running down the length of the sheds.

Men and women and boys and girls. White eyeballs flashing in black faces. White teeth showing as the water-calabashes and the rice-bowls pass down the ranks.

"Droop and be sullen, and you get no rice. Look lively, and you're worth the feeding." This is an axiom the loaded whips have flogged into the savage mind. And the men who carry the loaded whips, and guard the human merchandise, are brown or yellow or white of skin. There are many who are white. . . .

Evil-eyed, lustful, foul of speech, whatever be their language, with gold rings in their ears and on their fingers, cutlasses and pistols in their sashes and the loaded whips in their hands. . . .

Not only to avoid mosquitoes and malaria do they quarter on board the flat-boats (house-barges built of solid timber), but in case of attack by night. Here their hammocks hang under the fly-nets, here their plentiful table awaits them. Here are their business offices, where their clients are cordially received.

See the bags of gold from the Slave-ships' boat brought up by the grizzled supercargo. One of his two assistants is a young and slender fellow; bronzed, handsome, and showily dressed. His dark hair falls in ringlets, whereas the iron-grey hair of the Captain is plaited in the old-fashioned pigtail. He is a short, spare, elderly man, who wears a plain cocked beaver hat and clean white ruffled linen, showing at the single breast and cuffs of a full-skirted blue cloth coat. There are pistols in his sagging pockets

and 'a cutlass is belted about him, though his shore-going blue smallclothes have gilt buckles at the knees, and his sea-boots have been changed for buckled shoes.

See the ledgers lying open on the counter, recording sales of negroes; and the scales to weigh the English guineas that are welcomed everywhere. One of these plump and handsome coins is worth forty-eight livres of Mauritius, two-and-a-quarter hard dollars of Portugal, two-and-three-fourths of a golden star pagoda of Madras. And eight of them will buy a Slave, male, young, and in hard condition; who was bought from a slave-raiding negro chief for a set of brass manilles. These are the rings that adorn the wrists, the upper arm and ankles. . . . They are made by the million in Merry England, and exported for the Trade. . . .

Business done, what a pledging of healths in arrack, brandy, and Geneva, and sangaree made with Muscovado rum, and mingled with the juice of fresh limes. And then the longboats are signalled from the ship, the bales and cases of Manchester and Birmingham goods are landed and the boats are packed from stem to stern with chained and manacled slaves. And so, up anchor, and away for French, Spanish, or Portuguese Colonies,—needing fresh labour and fresh blood to revivify the soil. The buyers have paid cash in advance, so if Government cruisers prove active—scuttle, and take to the boats while she sinks, or burn her, and lose them their prize!

Not for nothing had Stephen spelt his way through the volume of *Lives and Exploits*. The Geoffrey Braby to whom it had belonged had been his grandfather. . . . The ancient cigars, whose vapid smell clung about the yellowed pages, had been smoked by the man, and those splashes of wine and coffee had been spilled there by his hand.

The hand that burned the slave-ship. The bloodstained hand of a murderer. . . . Stephen grew giddy, and sickened at the knowledge of his kinship with the wretch. And boy as he was, if he could have bled out of his veins the blood that belonged to the Brabys, he would have faced the ordeal without a quiver of the lips.

Or so it seemed to him at the time. Now his mother's voice was speaking.

“Nought more’s to tell. Now yo’ knows all. I’ll plead wi’ yo’ no further.”

She lifted his head from her shoulder, and drew her arm from about him, sighing as she rose from her narrow seat upon the boundary-stone. She would have moved on homewards, but his hand upon her, checked her. He said, with that new, determined look that foreshadowed in the boyish face the coming of the man:

“Mother, you’ve got to listen. Now you’ve told me ’bout the gettin’ of that money—I’m glad to th’ bottom o’ my heart as none on it’ll come our way! I’m glad th’ Will were never found. Theer never were a better job than th’ old man ’as made it, losin’ it! For I tells ye I’d sooner starve to death than touch the dirty stuff!”

She cried out in the sheer joy of her victory and caught him to her bosom; and he flung his young arms round her, and hugged her back again. As her eyes went over Stephen’s yellow head towards the eastward strip of woodland, a figure showed against the smoky-blue of the leafless trees behind.

The man who had waited at the cowyard gate would be waiting there again to-morrow. Dull anger burned in Malvina, mingled with sharper scorn. To have blustered and bragged about going his gate, and then to come crawling back again, seemed to her mind one crowning proof of the faithlessness of men.

She gave one more glance of infinite contempt, but the figure was there no longer. It had stepped back, and the crowding trees had blotted it from her sight. But a warning dizziness she had felt of late made the sunset-reddened landscape swim before her.

She moved homewards very silently, with her hand on Stephen’s neck.

Vigilantly as the maternal cat observes the doings of her kitten, and with a remote aloofness resembling the cat’s, Malvina waited Stephen’s return from Tom Pover’s after supper.

He carried nothing in his hands when he appeared, and showed no perceptible bulge upon his person; and yet he wore a sheepish air and was very red in the face.

Braby was at practice with the Ringers, and would be sure to wind up at 'The Pure Drop,' and Stephen, relieved that the coast was clear, slipped furtively out again.

"Pipes an' 'bacca?" queried Malvina. "Maybe Tom ha' bin' teachin' him smokin'." She smothered a sigh and continued washing up, and readying the room for the night. Then Stephen strode in with a resolute air, carrying an oddly-shaped brown-paper parcel. He made for the ladder leading to the loft, and Malvina's heart failed.

Suddenly Stephen strode back to her side, clapped down the parcel on the table, and sternly signed to her to uncover the mystery its wrappings concealed. But though her feminine fingers itched, Malvina shook her head at him.

"I wanna' ha' nowt to do wi' it!" said she, and went on with her work.

Thus rebuffed, Stephen began taking out the pins that fastened the brown paper; huge brass pins, and so many of these that Malvina was obliged to help. When the final wrapping, a single sheet of the *Hertfordshire Weekly Courier*, came off, she started in undisguised dismay.

On the table stood a chimney-pot hat of an obsolete type of architecture. It had weathered some thirty summers, but was in good condition yet.

"My gonnies!" exclaimed Malvina, who seldom resorted to an expletive. "Whatever did yo' frame to do wi' that old scalcrow, lad?"

"It bain't no scarecrow neither!" retorted Stephen huffily. "'Tis real silk, an' a bargain for a shillin', it be!"

"Eh!" said Malvina, ruefully regarding the ancient head-gear, which shone with the greasy lustre of faithful polishing. It flanged generously outward at the crown, decreasing in girth towards the temples, and the generous curl of its brim might have framed the Gladstonian countenance.

"Eh! I hannot seen that theer owd hat sin' the Sunday yo' wer' Chrissuned. John Pover an' Mrs. Pover comed wi' me, an' John he wore it then. He dropped it when he promised an' vowed—him standin' fur yo'r godfather! An'

Mrs. Pover, as stood fur godmother, she took it away from th' man."

"Well, it ain't John Pover's hat no more. He give it to Tom," asserted Stephen, growing restive under this effluence of biographical detail. "An' he's sold it to me for a shillin', an' I be goin' to wear it!"

"A silver shillin'," murmured Malvina, "be a terrible sight o' money. Eh, well, let yo' put it on. But yo'r young for it, I sore misdoubt!"

"'Twill make me look older," said Stephen, and boldly assumed his purchase, which—Pover being a big-headed man—concealed him to the eyes.

"My gonnies!" gasped Malvina, and Stephen flushed with pleasure, mistaking the unsteady accents of laughter repressed for those of admiration and awe. He had known the hat would age him, whereas the venerable headgear intensified to cherubic innocence the youthfulness of his boyish face.

"Eh, well, if yo' mun wear it, take off that mournin' weeper." Malvina indicated a six-inch dado of crape that encircled the hat. "I reckons as John Pover mun ha' walked in that at his second sister's burial," she added, as she ripped off the mourning-band and put it away in her drawer.

It might be wanted one of these days! she thought to herself, as Stephen bore the hat to his eyrie, and the mirthful tears she wiped from her eyes were mingled with salter drops. And then she smiled, and her dimple showed, and the corners of her eyes crinkled. The boy was so young, so blessedly young! She would have him a long while yet.

One Sunday, dressed in his London clothes,—to test the maturing powers of his purchase, Stephen, having first improved its fit with a wadding of paper, put it on. Ten minutes later, whether by accident or design, the chronicler is ignorant, he strolled past the gate of the village school as the Sunday Classes streamed out.

Given the possession of some muscular power and a certain amount of science, a boy of twelve can beat three out of four untrained boys of his age. But assailed by a veritable swarm of boys, issuing from early Sunday

School . . . human hornets armed with clods and jeers instead of poisoned stings . . .

Stephen gave up, and turned tail, pursued by the Sabbath students from the south-east corner of Tolleymead Green up the length of the Tolley Brook Road. He ran like a hare with the beagles close behind, carefully holding on the hat, for his wadding of paper had vanished. And the mocking rhyme of his childhood—the same, but with a difference—chanted to the immemorial No-tune—accompanied him as he ran . . .

“Your mother be a Gipsy,
Trampin’ Tinker Gipsy!
Your Mother be a Gipsy
An’ your Da be a Drunken Sot!”

The road had been scraped on Saturday with the rusty horse-drawn scraper, and piles of clods at the hedgerow-side waited removal later on. A clod dunted Stephen in the small of the back, and a stone knocked the hat off. He yelled, and dived to retrieve his own, and one of the Bendall boys kicked it, and Abel Thickbroom (First Prize in Old Testament Genealogies) kicked it away from Bendall (Second Prize Catechism), whereupon Montague Haybitt (Extra Consolation Prize for Regular Attendance) hacked at it viciously and fell on it, and it burst and was squashed flat.

Then Stephen saw red, and, roaring, charged into the thick of his assailants, and these, foreseeing Hammering to come, incontinently fled. And kicking the deplorable wreck of Pover’s hat before him, he returned along the Tolley Brook Road the poorer by the sum of a shilling, though richer by the amount of experience the money had bought him; and decidedly older than he had been upon the previous day.

He had meant to buy a stick-up collar, but now he renounced the notion. Let it go, with the preposterous headgear that had made him a coward just now. Suppose little Lou Buckley had seen him running away from ridicule. Let them hoot and howl as much as they liked—never would he run again!

He would cure himself of the fear of things. He was afraid of ghosts, for instance, and nothing could have bribed him to be in Tolleymead Churchyard at twelve o'clock at night. For at that hour the Yew Tree, according to local tradition, turned solemnly round three times, nobody knew why. Also there were certain nights when you could see the Liar, smoking a long pipe, and drinking out of a bowl of blazing brandy as he leaned against his epitaph, carved on the Tower Stone. Well, Stephen would go to the Churchyard one night, and wait till Twelve struck from the Tower and be bolder for ever after, because of the thing he had forced himself to do.

He kicked the wreck of the hat into the Tolley Brook, and saw it start on its journey, hurrying south to see the Brent River, and possibly the great Reservoir. Then he went home, and jumped the garden-gate, as he used before the falling of the Shadow, and even as he landed on the narrow brick-paved path, he knew that he had jumped because he was afraid. . . .

"How often have I told you not to do that?" Braby shouted at him from the window.

"You never telled me, because I never done it afore," said his son.

"You have a Tongue then, have you, you young oaf?" demanded Braby, coming to the threshold. He had been out unusually late, even for him—upon the previous night. But he had been unusually sober, for him—when he returned in the drizzling daybreak, and had slept heavily, and was, in fact, but recently arisen from his bed.

"I reckon as much—when 'tis wanted," said Stephen, still looking at him boldly, though his nerves were jerking, and his skin crept with repulsion rather than fear.

For he hated looking his father in the face. Under that narrow, frowning forehead, topped with a sweep of lustreless black hair, were eyes that stabbed and stung. And the unwholesomely red mouth, under the ragged black moustache, was full of jeers and tauntings. Never had it uttered a kindly word, within the memory of the boy.

He had had a father who had hated him, Stephen re-

membered. He had grown to the verge of manhood in a home that was no home. His old nurse had loved him, and Rumbold seemed fondish of him. . . . And Stephen's mother—— Could a man be all vile, who had won a love like hers?

Thoughts akin to these, if inchoate and crude, rose in the mind of Stephen, and Braby, if he thought at all, was sensible of a change in the boy. He had chewed the cud of an idea skilfully suggested by Haybitt. The cub was getting big and strong. Why not make him of use?

He was ranging himself on the mother's side, and this would prove inconvenient as he waxed still bigger and stronger. To gain an influence over him now would be hard, but harder later on. . . . Braby began in a tone that was meant to be pleasant and ingratiating:

"So the village pack were running you, were they, my hopeful scion? I heard them giving tongue with that damned gibberish of theirs."

Stephen answered, clenching the strong young fists that hid in his jacket pockets.

"Ay, but I reckons I give a good few on 'em summat more to sing about."

"Because you wanted to stick up for your father? Eh, my Trojan?"

Stephen was shamedly silent. He had hit them, but on his own account. Braby went on:

"So you have pluck, and can use your fists. Well, that's a thing worth knowing. You have brains under that yellow thatch of yours, and a pair of eyes in your head. You recognize your father for what he is. A misunderstood, ill-used gentleman. Worth any twenty of the canting knaves who look down on him, by G——!"

Stephen blushed to his hair-roots with pleasure at this praise, though he wriggled and shuffled awkwardly. Malvina, frying bacon for their mid-day meal, could hardly believe her ears.

Here was her Master speaking kind to the boy, and praising instead of becalling him! She turned from her little old cooking-range to send a glance at the pair.

What did it mean? In Malvina's narrow world, fresh events were hailed as portents. After fourteen months of indifference and ill-will, and occasional ill-usage, could it be possible that the Master was taking to the boy!

Now he laughed, and the raucous harshness of his mirth was mingled with Stephen's fresh young laughter. What they said was lost in the hissing of the bacon and potatoes in the pan. Malvina would have given much—she who had nought to give any one!—to know the drift of the talk they held together at the gate.

Braby had said, pinching Stephen's upper arm where the tough young muscle swelled it:

"A biceps. Damme! we shall have you fighting for a championship soon! Meanwhile, since I have such a swingeing chap for my son, I shall make use of him. Supposing he can hold his jaw as well as use his hands!"

"I'm as safe as any, I reckon," said Stephen, "when it comes to talkin'?"

Braby chuckled, and the sallow hand that had kneaded Stephen's biceps went round Stephen's neck as he whispered to the boy what he would have to do.

It was easy enough. At an hour that seemed the middle of the night to Stephen, he was to come down in his clothes and boots and let himself quietly out. If his mother were awake and spoke to him, he would give an explanation, in the homespun terms that neither provoke dispute, nor admit of delay.

He was to take the short hand-hoe from the shed, cross the glebe-field behind the tavern, and get over the west-side fence of it into the Rectory road. He had better cross the Churchyard, because, late as was the hour, he might encounter some one in the lane between the Churchyard and the Rectory grounds.

Then he would push on to Copcot Elms at the corner of the Tolley Hall coverts. There was a clamp of 'tatures in the field that ran along the covert-side. Hidden in the clamp at the eastward end, that pointed towards the Great North high-road, he would find a sack that weighed a bit. . . . He was to make all smooth and neat with the hoe, when he had taken out the sack. . . .

Then he was to carry the sack to the back of Haybitt's premises. If a man happened to be waiting there and said 'Peas,' he would answer 'Beans.' Then he would give the sack to the man, but if no man were waiting, he would dump down the sack at the back of Haybitt's wall, whoop once like an owl—and come home.

"At quarter to twelve I'd be leavin' here. At twelve I'd be crossin' th' Churchyard," thought Stephen, "and I'd pass th' Liar's Stone, I would!—an' if th' Liar wer' there——"

He felt a chilly creeping amongst the roots of his curly hair, and his shirt grew clammy upon him at the mere thought of the advent of the inevitable night. But he continued his train of thought, while Braby watched him greedily.

"An' I'd get me out again over th' Churchyard wall at th' corner where th' Yew Tree stands. And if it turned itself round three times as they say it do at midnight—it couldn' kill me wi' turnin' nor chivy me when I run . . ."

He was less certain about the Liar, for according to local legend, that luridly convivial personage was addicted to chivying—with the hospitable intention of sharing with the chivied his pipe and his blazing brandy. And if any one sipped from the Liar's bowl, or took a whiff of the Liar's tobacco, the Liar was reported to exclaim: 'Mine!' and whisk his soul down to Hell.

"Speak up, and say, in the devil's name!—have you got the guts to do it?" snarled Braby, losing his temper in his characteristically sudden way.

"I'll do it," said Stephen, turning pale, and with a glittering mask of dewdrops covering the surface of his face from the forehead to the chin.

"Shake hands on it, my Trojan, and then come in to dinner!" said Braby, clapping him on the back and offering his hand. And Stephen took and shook the hand, and the memory of a certain night a twelvemonth back last November, when it had taken him by the chin, rose up in his mind anew.

"There'll be sixpence or maybe a shilling for yourself," said his father, a moment later.

"I don' wan' it," responded Stephen in a curious muffled growl.

"Never turn your nose up at Money. There's nothing on earth like it!" said Braby, and took him by the shoulders and forcibly turned him round. "Look beyond there! A mile or two of road and by-road, and a bit of metalled highway, and Brabycott village, and Brabycott House, and the Park and the Home farm and the rest . . . And seventy thousands pounds in the Bank—or that was in the Bank a few years ago. Mine, mine—lawfully mine!—and the loss of a bit of paper has left me as bare as a new-hatched thrush, and fattened the carrion-crows. See me!" He struck his hollowish chest, repeating a favourite action; conscious, cheaply theatrical—and coughed, and went coughing on: "See me as I stand before you—and think what Money might have made of me. Look at your mother in her worn old gown and her bonnet that the rats might nest in—and ask yourself whether Money would have made any difference in her? And take a squint at yourself, by the way, in your mother's cracked old looking-glass, and think what Money might make of you!"

"I wouldn' say No! to money," blurted out Stephen clumsily, "as were come by decent an' Christian-like. But supposin' 'twasn't, I would!"

He turned paler as he encountered Braby's eyes. They reminded him of a viper's. His voice had a venomous hiss in it, that bore out that resemblance to the snake.

"We'll go in and eat our dinner. That was 'come by decent and Christian-like.' The reason—very possibly—that there won't be enough for one."

He made it just enough for one. For the others there were potatoes.

"Nourishing things for women and boys," said Braby, "with plenty of bread."

All through the meal he kept up his new *rôle* of kind and indulgent father, with lapses into the earlier part of ill-used gentleman. And when it was finished, he sat by the hearth, making, with hair-wire and pliers, neat sliding loops that his wife and son knew well were poacher's snares.

At twelve o'clock Stephen was getting into the Churchyard. He had accomplished the feat of leaving the house without waking his mother up. He had slewed his guilty eye towards the bed where she lay profoundly sleeping, with one massive arm, buried in her streaming curls, hanging laxly over the edge of the mattress, and the other thrown across her face, to ward the candle from her eyes.

And Braby sitting up beside her with the flaring dip at his elbow, smoking and spitting, and conning some soiled papers written in a clerkly hand, had looked over these, and nodded, and the door had shut quietly—and Stephen was out in the February night.

Rain had fallen steadily all day long, but had stopped and the stars were shining. The Dog glowed angry crimson over the tops of the damson and apple-trees of the little patch of orchard on the south side of the house. The mass of the trees blocked out the twinkling midnight lights of London. And to Stephen's right, the wide expanse of the wheatacres lay veiled in darkness, only broken by the slim black outlines of a row of sapling oaks.

A great moony splendour Stephen could not name burned with strange iridescent fire over the distant woods of Brabycott. Charles's Wain ruled the upper middle sky, Aldebaran lamped low towards the West. A little whimpering, chilly wind was running round and round the house as though it had lost its quarter. Stephen went to the woodshed and found the little hand-hoe where he had placed it in readiness behind the door. He buttoned the tool with some difficulty inside his old woollen Cardigan. Then he went out of the garden without clicking the latch of the gate. That sound had always waked his mother before his father's homecoming. He had sometimes wondered why this should be, but he comprehended now.

He crossed the road, and jumped the Tolley Brook, which the recent rains had swollen.

To get over the fence into the grazing glebe was extremely easy. The cows would be gathered at the north end of the field, with their rumps turned towards the hedge.

But if any cow with an original bent of mind, and a dislike of conventionality, happened to be lying in the middle of the field, one might tumble over her in the dark.

This did not happen. The western boundary of the field was a wall of old-world masonry. Stephen set his palms on its rounded top, and vaulted into the road. A frightful yowl froze his blood and a prolonged 'fuff!' assured him that he had jumped—or nearly so—upon some prowling cat. . . .

The southing moon loomed out from behind a heavy bank of clouds over London. And the great east window of Tolleymead Church, where the old stained glass was left in patches, loomed out of the dark beyond the churchyard wall in rather a ghostly way. The flagged path that led from the Rector's private gate in the south wall to the Vestry shone in the moonlight like a great pale snake crawling across the grass.

A wreath of immortelles on a recent grave,—the new tombstone and kerbing of another,—stood out in the blue-white radiance, backed by black funereal yews. Stephen touched a bit of cold iron which he carried in his right-hand pocket, and hoisting himself to the summit of the wall, got down on the Churchyard side.

The path led straight to the Vestry door and then under the row of windows, small and filled in with modern glass, that were on the Church's south side. You turned the corner, and there was the west door and beyond the square bulk of the Tower, with a separate door in the south side, facing you as you stood.

The door gave access to the cold echoing place, where between the overhead cross-beams the ropes from the Tower belfry hung down to the ringers' floor. Wheelwright Rumbold kept the great iron key, and stayed behind on practice-nights, to lay the used ropes tidily, and loop them out of reach of the rats.

Rumbold did not believe in ghosts. The utterances of which he had delivered himself, on the subject of Marching Corpses, had not faded from Stephen's mind.

And when he had been questioned on the other prob-

ability of Dead folks turning in their coffins, he had said he put no faith in that; nor yet he never would.

Strong in his faith in Rumbold, and gripping his bit of cold iron, Stephen passed the door of the belfry and soon stood under the Liar's Stone.

It was on the north side of the West Tower, the side the Liar had chosen. The moonlight, striking from the southward, left the Tower's north side all black. Stephen braced himself for the ordeal, and produced a match from his pocket. Holding his breath, and clutching his talismanic bit of cold iron, he leaned forwards and struck the lucifer on the surface of the Liar's Stone.

The stone being damp from recent rain, the match sputtered and expired. Stephen fumbled for another and struck it, and the head broke off and fell. It flickered for an instant near Stephen's boot—and he saw that he stood beside a gravestone. The match-flame gave one glimpse of the epitaph upon the stone, before it fizzled and died.

Sacred to the Memory of
ANNA MARIA BRABY
of Brabycott,
Who Departed This Life
In the Hope of an Everlasting Crown,
August 11th, 1857,
Aged 42.

He had never before stopped to scan the stone, which had no railing round it, and the words upon the rain-blobbed surface came with the effect of a surprise.

Here she lay, the thick-set, black-eyed, sallow-complexioned youngish woman, who had been the favourite and confidante of that grim old father of hers. She had listened to his stories of the Slave Trade between Guinea and the West Indies, and wished that she had been a man, and a Slaver too, perhaps.

Twenty feet distant from Miss Ann's gravestone, a plain slab of local granite,—daylight would have shown the Braby vault, within a railing rusted with neglect. The place of sepulture was surmounted by a square unwieldy

monument of damp-streaked yellowish marble carved with garlands and cherubs' heads. One side was occupied by a pretentious coat-of-arms, supported by two fish-tailed sirens. On the other side was an inscription which Stephen had once painfully spelt out :

Here Rest the Earthly Remains of
 GEORGE THOMASSON BRABY
 Of Brabycott,
 Merchant and Master-Mariner,
 Aged 62.
 A Faithful Husband, A Devoted Father And
 A Devout Christian He
 Exemplified in his Private & Publick Life
 The teachings of Holy Scripture. And
 Departed this Life November 1st, 1817
 In the Sure & Certain Hope of
 Life Eternall.

Also Are Here Interred
 The Remains of
 HARRIOTT WILHELMINA,
 Aged 38, Died June 20th, 1833,
 Daughter-in-Law of the Above
 And Wife Of
 Geoffrey Thomasson Braby
 Of Brabycott.

Here Also Rests the Body of
 GEOFFREY THOMASSON BRABY
 Of Brabycott,
 Aged 73,
 Who Departed This Life
 August 14th, 1855.
 III. Cor. VIII. Phil. III. XVII. V. Thess. XXII
 This Inscription Has Been Placed Here
 By His Sorrowing Daughter
 Anna Maria Braby
 Of Brabycott.

The three-decked inscription so painfully spelt out had faded from Stephen's memory. Yet disconnected lines of it flickered up under the stimulus of fear.

For he was afraid, sickeningly afraid. The Liar with his blazing punch-bowl, the Turning Yew near the lych-gate, paled and diminished to common bugaboos in the glare of this grislier dread.

The squat sour woman with the beady eyes, who mouldered under the gravestone, would have had no terrors for her nephew in the ordinary way. But now she was worse than the Turning Yew and more horrible than the Liar because of her connection with those two old men boxed up in the Braby vault:

George Thomasson Braby of evil fame, the old slave-trading Captain; and Geoffrey his son, the supercargo's clerk who had burned the shipload of slaves.

"Black men an' women an' childern too. Packed like herrin's in a barrel. . . . An' th' Sun sank down, an' it wer' Night, but th' Night wer' as light as th' day. Wi' th' light o' the blazing Slave-ship as Braby's son had set Fire to. . . . Twelve hundred souls. . . . An' Braby an' his son played cards by th' light o' th' Fire."

Were they sitting up in their coffins now, chuckling and grinning at each other, the hoary murderer of sixty-two and the son who had died at seventy-three? . . . With streams of icy water trickling down his back, and hair that bristled on his scalp, Stephen glanced in the direction of the monument. It could not have been quite one o'clock, but the blackness seemed tinged with grey. He could make out the perpendicular lines of the rusted iron railings and the urn-topped block of masonry looming behind the iron-work.

Did a pale phosphorescent glimmer crawl over the surface of the marble? . . . What was that rasping, scratching sound, and that thudding on the sodden turf?

Something was moving near the Braby vault. Old George and Old Geoffrey were coming! . . . Stephen yelled, and took to his heels, leaping over graves and gravestones, bruising his shins among upright slabs, charging bushes that gave way beneath his weight. . . .

And the Something was hard upon his heels. He heard it thudding behind him, and, prodded to desperate energy by fear, sped blindly through the dark. Once his iron-nailed heel crashed through the glass enclosing a wreath of china flowers. He seemed sinking into fathomless depths!—but he wrenched himself free and fled on. . . .

Now the great spreading bulk of the ancient Yew reared blackly up before him, lifting to the sky the foliaged boughs that sprang from its great-girthed bole. Old when men lopped those towering boughs to make longbows for the archers of Agincourt,—the Tolleymead Yew may have furnished shafts for the arrows of Richard's Crusades.

The wren and the nightingale, the grey wagtail and the white and tawny owls, lived and bred in it season after season. Possibly the yew owed its green old age, and the birds their sweet security, to the ugly village legend that flourished in its shade, like the toadstools that sprouted from its bark.

Now Stephen, with wild staring eyes, and the Brabys following behind him, plunged into the thick black shadow of the Yew and out on the other side. Now the flint-built, brick-topped wall of the churchyard rose before him and he leaped at it. . . . He was over, and out again and running up the road. North, towards the Tolley Hall Woods.

When Tolleymead Church clock struck the quarter to one, he was kneeling by the potato-clamp, frantically delving with the little hand-hoe in the indicated spot. Now he had hold of the hidden sack. It was uncommon heavy, and the objects inside were surely not potatoes. He undid the string about the neck and slipped in an exploring hand. . . .

“Birds!” . . . said Stephen to himself, and as though in confirmation, a cock-pheasant crowed in the covert that ran beside the field. So the mystery of the shortened shotgun, and the puzzle of divers nets and snares that Stephen had found hidden in the woodshed, were, thenceforth to the understanding of Braby's son, problems made clear and plain.

Haybitt's house, with its yard and sheds behind, instead of the customary garden, stood on the edge of the Goose Green, a little above 'The Pure Drop.' When Stephen, panting and breathless now,—reached the rearward wall of the premises, there was no man visible to the naked eye, and he gave a sigh of relief.

Then as he turned to lower the sack, by easing it against the wall behind him, he heard boot-toes scraping against the bricks on the other side, and a whisper above the level of his head:

"Peas?" said the presumable owner of the scraping boots in a thickish lisping whisper, and the shaggy sconce of Haybitt's elder son rose up above the level of the wall.

"Beans!" said Stephen, sickening at the thing he had been flattered into doing. . . . The voice spoke again as the lanky frame that Stephen had pounded on Sunday followed its owner's frowsy head over the by-way-of-butcher's back-wall.

"Gi' us a hoist wi' that there sack," said the frowsy one authoritatively. "And don't yer go hoam by the roadway, 'cos the bobby be on his beat. Joe Pounds he passes to'rds the Station Works 'bout this time, an' comes back in ten minutes. Cross the corner o' th' glebe, an' nip over th' fence when Pounds be safe out o' the way."

Stephen grunted, suppressing his wrath, and the frowsy one, bidding him stand by the sack, and hoist when he should feel a haul, climbed back over the wall chuckling. Then the sack began to move, and Stephen, hoisting with a vengeance, heard it fall with a thud on the other side, and knew by the smothered curses of his enemy that some portion of young Haybitt's anatomy had intervened between its weight and the ground.

He got back over the fence of the glebe-field as a fine thin rain was falling, and dropped down in the dank wet grasses to wait until the solitary policeman, who divided his services between the hamlet of Brabycott and Tolleymead village, returned along the Tolley Brook Road. When the clumping boots of Constable Pounds had passed, and their sound could no longer be distinguished, he stumbled to his feet again, and rubbed his sleepy eyes.

There was a yellow streak of false dawn in the distance over Romney Marshes, and by its light the terrors of the previous hours shrank small. He scorned the sucksop who had scudded like a hare from a tomb with two dead old men in it, and an imaginary bugaboo that had chased him in the dark.

“Hwoof!” said a cow indignantly, as Stephen tripped and sprawled over her. Her wet hairy body heaved up stern first, and he slid from her hindquarters towards her horns. Then her fore part was hoisted with another grunt, and he slithered towards her rump again, vainly clutching with numbed blue hands for something by which to hold.

Finally, with hoisted tail, the cow broke into a gallop, and vanished into the drab-grey mist in a cloud of clover-smelling steam. Stephen, left sitting in the middle of the wet field, picked himself up and plodded homewards, savage and chilly and weary,—a thoroughly wretched boy.

The stars were paling towards dawn as he got out over the fence of the glebe-field. He had forgotten that the Tolley Brook lay between the field and the high-road. He had reached the brink of the deep hollow in which it lay, before its voice came out of the darkness. He jumped it high above the crossing-place, and was back on the Tolley Brook Road.

The cottage rose before him, as he stumbled up the cart-way. The sweet smell of burning apple-wood warned him that his mother was astir. A thin blue column of vapour wreathed up from the single slate-topped chimney. An owl sat on the ridge-pole of the dripping thatch, and called mellowly to another in the orchard, that sent back a soft gurgling note from somewhere amongst the trees. A fox barked, some distance off, and from the coppice at the bottom of the garden came the thin, insistent, piercing scream that is the love-call of the vixen to her mate.

“*Ee-yah, ee-yah—ee-yah, ee-yah!*”

It was February and the foxes were breeding. Two slim four-legged bushy-tailed shadows had played all night round the oak-tree stump. They had gambolled amongst the cabbages, and all over the orchard, to the accompaniment of that yapping squeal:

“*Ee-yah, ee-yah, ee-yah!*”

As the boy touched the latch of the gate, the thin wild voice was silent. As his lagging footsteps reached the cottage door, it was opened by his mother's hand. A little fire crackled between the hobs of the range. There was no other light in the living-room, on the threshold of which Malvina stood with a stern and awful face.

Her feet were bare, and the clean coarse linen of her old-fashioned nightgown was hidden by a well-worn Indian shawl, that partly covered her head.

Stephen was well acquainted with the old Indian shawl. It had covered his cradle in babyhood, and wrapped in its warm, soft, ample folds he had been carried afield by his mother. When he had been sick it had covered his bed; he had played tents under its outspread richness. It might have fetched ten guineas even now, if an expert had come that way. . . .

Her dead old mistress had given the shawl to dead old Susan Parmint. Seen by the daylight, it was old and frayed, and darned with common mends. But its regal purples and rusty-reds and rich border of embroidered palm-leaves might have draped the mourning *Dêmêtêr* as she sought for her ravished child.

Such a peplum might have cloaked the goddess as she sat by the fountain of Eleusis, and covered her from head to foot as she entered the palace of the King. And when she bent her imperial brows in rebuke of the son of Keleos, the young *Demophoôn* may have felt as small as Stephen was feeling now.

“Go to yo'r bed. Take this wi' yo'. What's to say I'll say i' th' mornin' . . .”

A slice of bread and a steaming mug were thrust into his sodden hands. He stumbled up the ladder as a peevish voice called from the bed to Malvina, and as he threw a resentful glance at the figure under the bed-coverings, he caught the flash of a sharp black eye and heard a stifled laugh.

“Shut the door. There's a damned draught,” said Braby, “and come back to bed with you! . . . Do you

think I want you clinking about when it isn't a quarter to three!"

Malvina glanced between the lowered blind and the jamb of the southward window, ere she obeyed the rudely-given command. The wantoning foxes were silent, and the owl had flown back to his partner. The crinkled Savoys and red cabbages stood in rows, like weary rain-drenched soldiers, overtopped by the scraggy, naked stems of the Brussels sprouts that were past.

The man Mackilliveray stood upon the bank amongst the hazel-stools and birches of the coppice. The slight noise she had made in touching the blind must have reached him, for instantly he was gone. . . . And if the wrath that burned in her blood could have leaped from her with the force of lightning, the man who had waited by the cowyard gate would have troubled her no more.

She said nothing to Stephen when the morning came, and he crept down the ladder from the garret. She was silent then, and silent still as the days went on and on. Yet there were many nights when a scowling boy went out to do Braby's errands. She saw him go, and saw him return, and still she held her tongue.

Mackilliveray followed her no more; and village tongues were silent. But one morning the postman rapped at the door. He had a letter for her. A soiled envelope, with the stamp stuck crookedly in the middle, and her name crookedly written underneath the stamp.

There was a pheasant's feather inside the envelope, within a scrawled half-sheet of paper. The paper bore a message that turned her cold, though she had known before. . . .

"Narbor.

this Be to tel yu as The Young Pup be
folerin in the Owd Dogs Traises.

Luk Owt fur troubel

from A Trew Friend."

She had no need to guess who the true friend was who

had written the anonymous letter. As the foul thing flared and shrivelled in her fire, she said:

“Mackilliveray!”

And she sensed a slow, dogged purpose in this man, working steadily towards her: moved by no pity, touched by no respect, intent on the attainment of its end.

Book the Third:

HOW STEPHEN ROBBED A HOTHOUSE AND FORTUNE
TURNED HER WHEEL

Book the Third: HOW STEPHEN ROBBED A
HOTHOUSE AND FORTUNE TURNED HER
WHEEL

I

SPRING advanced and the drone of the steam-thrasher was borne with winged thistledown on the winds that passed over Tolley Hall Farmyard. Pale wind-flowers hovered over the dead leaves in the coppice at the bottom of Malvina's little garden, and the daffodils that Shakespeare loved, starred the grass of the meadows and fields. The blackthorn bloomed and the bird-cherry, and the apricot, peach and damson, and water-fennel and cow-parsnip and hemlock thrust rankly through the weathered weeds on the sides of the wheatacres drain.

As Haybitt's clients lost appetite for close-time partridges and pheasants, the bags that Stephen was sent to retrieve from near and distant hiding-places only consisted of ground-game that had been netted or snared. Many fat hares and rabbits were eaten at the cottage by the wheatacres; but though Malvina cooked their flesh, burning bones and offal with her rubbish, she made her own meal of bread and cheese, or bread if cheese there was none.

Stephen continued to help with the sheep, and worked with Pover on the ploughlands, faithfully bringing his mother home his earnings week by week.

And yet, though she would not have owned it, there was division between them. When he picked the first wild violets and as always brought them home for her, he put them in an egg-cupful of water, on a shelf beside her chair. Of old he would have laid them on her lap and earned one of her rare kisses. Now, although she thanked him for the gift, he had no kiss in return.

He silently resented what he felt to be unfairness. Was it to please himself or her that he did the things he loathed? But he went on seeking and finding, and fetching and carry-

ing for his father, and many a night when he should have been abed, was many miles from home. . . .

He acquired at this time a sleepy air, owing to these nocturnal outings, and the brain under his yellow curls acquired knowledge of a curious sort. Such wisdom as is necessary for the poacher who would make a profit out of poaching, and who would not be suspected and captured by the minions of the Law.

Stephen knew the hours of the keepers' patrols of byways and footpaths and side-tracks. He was certain of the points where the keepers' men would be posted when preserves were to be watched. He could name you the particular cross-ways and lanes where the Sergeant from Wheatstone Police Station or the mounted Superintendent from High Marnet met the local constables on their beat o' nights, and heard what they had to say.

Strange places Braby chose in which to conceal the loot of his raidings of country gentlemen's game coverts and farmers' rabbit-warrens. The chimneys of empty cottages, the hedgerow side of field dungheaps, the heaps of metal left by the roadside, were used to hide his bags.

A rusty chain, hooked over a staple in the side of a well or stone-pit, when hauled on, would come scooping up with the plunder made fast to the end. Or the sack would be hidden in a mangold-clamp. Or an end of the rope that tied it would stick innocently up in the middle of a patch of wet or sandy ground.

Brabycott coverts were empty now, save for stray birds that bred there. But there were hares and rabbits in plenty on the land. Strangely enough, Stephen thought, he was never sent to Brabycott. He waited for the word to go, but he waited, as yet, in vain.

He went nutting and blackberrying with young Haybitt in these days, and a dozen other hulking fellows, and robbed orchards on the sly, and went to fairs with them. They played football and cricket on Tolleymead Green on half-days and holidays. On Sundays they foregathered in the fields, smoked make-believe cigars of elm-root, and cheap tobacco in halfpenny clays, and pretended to be men.

Generally they gambled: played shove-halfpenny and all-

fours, and pitch-and-toss for coppers. Often silver coins would be mixed with the coppers on the ground. For the rest—Stephen was not ignorant of vice, but something kept him untainted. He loathed lewdness and filthy jests as he loathed the taste of drink.

But there was rebellion in the rich red blood that coursed through his strong young body. He longed to fill the emptiness of his life with splendid things. To learn, to know, to have mastery of the crafts that belong by right to manhood. To be and do, and build up life with strong, capable hands. . . .

A winged creature seemed pent within him, that sometimes brooded in silence, and at other times dashed itself madly against the bars of its cage. The rough pleasures he shared with his companions would dull or stifle these longings, though in a little while he felt them aching and stinging again.

A thing happened to him once that might have killed his winged guest for ever. He had been sent at midnight to a distant public-house. A lonely house at cross-roads with a larch-spinney behind it, and when he got there at midnight, light was showing through the shutter-chinks.

He knocked at the rearward door of the place and the noisy clamour of voices and the clinking of pots and glasses ceased, and the flaring lights went out. . . . Then he gave a signal he had been taught, and the lights were uncovered or re-kindled, and the roaring and clinking and roustering went on as though they had never stopped.

The door was unbarred by a dark-haired girl who carried a flaring candle, and wore a brooch that glittered in the lace about her neck. She relieved Stephen of his load and offered him a glass of liquor and seemed genuinely wounded when the offer was refused.

"Wait a minute, then," she said to the boy. "I've got something you'll not say 'No' to!" She disappeared and came back, and giggled as she pushed something against Stephen's cheek.

It was velvety soft and firm and cool, and gave forth an exquisite fruity fragrance. He made an incoherent sound of surprise, and took it eagerly from her hand.

It was a nectarine, glowing crimson and gold in the mingled moonlight and candle-light. The gift of some under-gardener, perhaps, who fancied the dark-browed girl.

“ ’Twas given to me for myself,” said the girl, smiling coquettishly at Stephen.

Her brown eyes shone like the stones of her brooch, and her cheeks were as red as the fruit.

Daylight would have shown the colour of her cheeks to be as false as her tawdry jewels, and revealed traces of a reckless life in her poor young brazen face. But here in the moonlight and candle-light she was pretty, very pretty. Stephen looked at her thinking this, and she looked back at him.

“Are your eyes blue by daylight?” she breathed, and softly touched his forehead with a hand blackened by the beer-pulls, and decked with cheap brass rings.

“Yes,” whispered Stephen, trembling.

“Come and show me them to-morrow!” said the girl, pouting her reddened lips temptingly.

“Nay, I’ve work to do,” he answered, and she screamed out an ugly word at him, and banged the door, and left him there with the nectarine in his hand.

He laid it down on a window-sill and went home heavily. His was the dull, stultifying life, that sharpens the lower faculties of the body at the expense of the higher, and plucks the wings of the soul. If ever Stephen thought of Lou Buckley now, it was rarely—very rarely. And the voices of the Market only called him now and then.

But one morning towards the middle of May, when the young green wheat was springing, and Tom Pover, with Stephen and some other lads, hand-hoed and weeded the drills, the boy, lying under a crab-apple tree in the hedge to eat his bread and bacon, turned over on his back and looked up at the blue sky, through the clusters of snowy bloom.

And the myriads of little flower-faces were sorry for Stephen Braby, who through no fault of his own had strayed from the paths that flowers approve.

“What must th’ Market look like now, when all th’

Spring flowers be bloomin'? What wouldn' I give to see it?" he asked of his aching heart.

He slouched home along the field-way when the rough day's work was over, and went to his attic fixed in mind not to go out that night. He heard Braby cross the room below, past the hour that should have found him stirring. His voice called from the bottom of the ladder. Stephen shuddered and lay still.

"So you've turned sulky?" said the hateful voice.

Still Stephen made no answer. To Malvina, wakeful in the bed below, came the terror that he might be ill. She rose up to go to him, as Braby set a foot on the ladder.

"This is (*hic*) my affair," said her lord and master thickly. "You will leave me (*hic*), Mrs. Braby, to deal myself with my son. You damned young loafer, rouse up there! Is this the time to be hogging?"

The speaker set an unsteady foot on one of the lower rungs. In his night-attire, with ruffled hair, the light of the flaring candle showed the misunderstood, ill-used gentleman in one of his ugliest moods.

"Wake up, you——" He scattered some flowers of speech metaphorically on the head of Stephen and, brandishing the dripping candlestick, essayed to mount another rung. . . .

Then he glanced above—to see a white set face framed in the darkness of the attic, and catch the gleam of a naked arm brandishing a broken jug. . . .

There was something terrible in the fixed blue eyes and that mute attitude of defiance. The drunkard's nerve gave way at the sight, and he floundered down upon the floor. To Malvina, who hurried to his aid, he shrieked that the young hound up there had raised his hand to his father! and, getting no answer from her frozen lips, reviled her for a heartless wife.

She and the boy were in league, he vowed. He went in danger from them! He would have protection from the Law. Ay, he would call in the Police. Then his mood softened into tears. He sought consolation at the cupboard, and hiccoughed, with his bottle at his dribbling mouth, that it was his only friend.

Such a man, such a husband, such a father he had been, and because of this he was outcast; slandered, reviled and hated; tricked, maltreated and robbed. Now his wife and son, for whose sakes he had borne outrages and humiliations, turned from the ill-used gentleman. . . . It was the last straw!

And drivelling and maundering thus, the martyr rolled under the table. Malvina could not lift him now; she was not as able as she had been. But she called to Stephen to come down. He silently obeyed her, and they laid the sleeping drunkard in his bed and covered his shamefulness.

Not a word, barely a look, was exchanged between them as they did this. The boy slunk up to his garret lair and the woman prepared to watch. But both mother and son knew very well that this hastened the hour of parting. Not much longer might a single roof shelter Wilfrid Braby and his son.

Yet the tyrant, when he wakened from his maudlin sleep, seemed to have forgotten what had happened. He had not, but that look in the set young face had cowed the brute in him. He told himself to be careful in dealing with the boy for the future. A young devil who was growing overhand, and knew so much too much. . . .

Stephen came home early on the Saturday with bad news to tell his mother. He had been dismissed by his employer with no promise of re-engagement later on. The farmer had had a letter written by an anonymous well-wisher. Penned in an illiterate, sprawling hand and freely spattered with ink, it informed him that his ploughboy was "thick with a Potchin Gang in the Nayborhud, and Wun of Thease Fine dais wold Find him Pinshed by the polis."

The farmer, a rough but kindly man, had grumbled over the letter, but later consultation with his wife had sealed his ploughboy's fate. He called Stephen up to him in the yard, and told him bluntly of the charges.

"Do you do such things or don't you?" he asked. "Are these lies, or are they not?"

"True, sir," said Stephen squarely.

"You young scoundrel!—" blustered the farmer.

But talking didn't cure such ways. He paid Stephen and

turned him off. And the look in the brave blue eyes that met his own made it hard to mete out justice. However, he consoled himself. The boy had got to go.

The Tolleymead Railway Station was growing towards completion. The New Branch Line came nearer with the end of every day. Part of the southward boundary-hedge of the wheatacres would be levelled in the week that followed, and the first cut made in the soil he loved by the mattocks of the digging-gang.

He would have to sack two boys or a man, and to do the former was wisest. Besides, the young dog had been poaching—he had owned to it blunt enough! But he thrust an extra florin in Stephen's palm, and bade him keep straight for the future.

"I will, sir," said Stephen simply, and touching his cap, he went home.

2

He walked slowly under his burden of care. He had got to tell his mother. She had returned earlier from work, and was hanging out some new-washed clothes. On the cart-track that ran by the garden-fence was drawn up a hawker's barrow. Attached to the barrow was a pony whom Stephen recognized as an acquaintance. And the square-built, stocky fellow in the sleeved plush waistcoat and fur cap, who leaned against the fence smoking, was none other than B. Faggis, of Lower 'Olloway.

"So here's the identical Young Shaver as we have been discoursing," said Mr. Faggis, smiling all over his square red face, as he shook Stephen by the hand. "As my Missus took such a shine to, and have arsked arter perpetooal, an' nothing would do her but a promise as wot I'd look 'im up. Being without said Missus, who's a-looking arter the shop at Lower 'Olloway—and my young man stopping at Barnet, to pack up a genooine Antigreek as—such knowings being in my partic'ler Line—I'd heard were to be Picked Up there!—I've room in the Barrer for a Passenger, an' havin' bis'ness with a Bloke at Brabycott—suppose you comes along o' me an' keeps a eye on the Prad?"

Malvina had started at the reference to Brabycott and looked anxiously at Stephen. He was silent and downcast, and shunned her glance, and her heart was sore for her boy.

“Brabycott House being shut up, there won’t be no Plum Cake nor Pork wine for us,” continued Mr. Faggis, “but a gliff at the Gardens the Shaver might git while I does my Bis’ness with the Bloke. If so be as said Shaver is willin’ an’ his mother is agreeable to the notion. Me bein’ responsible as an ’ouse’older, for his not gittin’ Pinched by the Police.”

The unfortunately applicable nature of the jest deprived Stephen of the power of responding. He turned pale, and stood twisting his ragged cap, without a word to say.

“Go with th’ gentleman, my dear,” said Malvina, suddenly melting, and the radiance that broke over the dour young face was her reward for the concession that hurt.

So it came to pass that in company with B. Faggis and the pony Smiler Stephen rattled over the mile or so of road and by-road and newly-metalled highway that divided the little old cottage that stood on the edge of the wheatacres, from the House where Wilfrid Braby had first seen the light of day.

3

There had been much rain in the beginning of the month, and the voice of the Tolley Brook—as it ran to swell the Brent River, and take a look at the Hendon Reservoir, and tumble into the Thames at Brentford, as Stephen loved to picture it doing—was louder than usual. The further bank, that climbed to the path called The Quaker’s Walk by old people, was starry with primroses, and their delicate scent came to Stephen on the westerly breeze.

At the top of the Tolley Brook Road was Cott Lane, branching east to the Tolley Hall Dairy Farm, and west past the rear lodge of Tolley Hall Park to the hamlet of Brabycott. A pleasant lane to drive along this fine afternoon in the month of May, with the hedges white with hawthorn, and the chestnuts all abloom. With the larks

mere singing specks on the blue sky and the thrushes and blackbirds piping, and the rooks in the elms of Tolley Hall, brooding on their last year's nests, or noisily building new.

Leaving Tolley Hall and its rooks behind, they came, as the lane grew wider, to a level stretch with cropped hedges, and ploughlands upon either side. Brabycott land, as Stephen knew, was well under cultivation. Far from exhibiting any signs of neglect during the previous years.

The whitewashed cottage of Joseph Pounds, the constable of S. Division, who divided his attention between Brabycott and the larger area of Tolleymead, was here, on the right-hand side of the lane. And there was Joe in his shirt-sleeves, digging in his neat front garden as though such beings as poachers did not exist in those parts.

Joe looked up and nodded to Stephen, who reddened as he touched his cap to him, and exchanged a greeting with Faggis as Smiler rattled them by. And then they were in Brabycott, a little clean churchless hamlet, no bigger than the middle slice out of an ordinary village, consisting of a short double row of whitewashed, thatched cottages, a Post Office, a chandler's, a baker's and an old-fashioned post-ing-house.

It had a deserted coach-yard at the side, and was roomy and heavy-beamed and gabled, and displayed a large pretentious sign of comparatively modern date, displaying an heraldic coat showing the head of a Black Man, supported by two fish-tailed mermaids, over the legend announcing it to be 'The Braby Arms.'

Here Faggis pulled up the willing prad, and whistled out the potman, an old-young man with a broken nose, who welcomed him cordially; and entrusting the functionary with a flat green bottle to be filled with the oldest Stingo, ordered a pint of half-and-half to 'lay the dust,' as he said.

"'Ave a drain, Shaver!" he pleasantly proposed, on the production of the frothing pewter, and offered it to Stephen, who drew back, shaking his head.

"Please no, sir!"

"Don't be shy of it, Shaver," advised B. Faggis. "What-

ever 'ud become o' the British working-man without his drop o' beer? And what do my Missus say to me—knowing me never overtook by it?—'Faggis, go along,' she say, 'and git your drain this minute, as are no good com'ny without it, being accustomed-like!' Them are the words of that Pearl o' Price, and Jewel in the Regalier of England, and no objection to a drop herself—the day's work bein' dooly done. What have you got to say to that?"

"I—I can't abide th' smell of it!" faltered Stephen, shrinking from the whiff of the bubbles on the pewter-rim.

"Then strike me pink if you know wot's good!" observed Faggis, draining the pewter and returning the emptied vessel to the shirt-sleeved man of pots.

"What's this? . . . Who doesn't know what's good? . . . You're here before your time, Faggis! Now, in the Devil's name, whose Boy have you got with you there? . . ."

The loud, coarse, bullying voice that broke in, belonged, Stephen knew, to Grower Grundall. He came, a big, red-faced, gross-bodied man, but hard of flesh, not flabby—driving a high-stepping raw-boned mare in a high-wheeled farmer's gig. Pulling up the mare, which was trotting very hard, so close behind the hawker that her spread fore-feet slid scrapingly under the tailboard of the barrow, and her yellow teeth were within an inch or two of Stephen's wincing ear.

"Woa, you brute! . . . Come back here! . . . What! . . . You will have it, will you? . . ." A vicious slash of the Grower's whip accompanied each exhortation, as he wrenched at the bit, and the big mare backed, and stood champing her foam. "Woa, you blasted Hellcat, woa!" He wrenched at the powerful bit again, and the mare, striking the flinty road so fiercely with a fore-hoof that the sparks flew, stood still, quivering in every limb.

"Begging your pardon, Mr. Grundall, sir!" The shirt-sleeved potman of the 'Braby Arms' scraped a foot and touched the lock upon his forehead. "But if you'd be pleased to let me loose a link or so of her curb-chain,—which is galling of her cruel—you'd find her more controllable, if I may use the word."

“Do I need you, Joseph Chewey, or any man that’s living, to show Me how a horse or a child, or a woman should be kept under control?”

“Why no, Mr. Grundall,” returned the offender, humbly touching his forehead. “I shouldn’t think o’ presumin’ in that there sort o’ way.”

“Then don’t you offer your betters advice that isn’t wanted!” said the Grower. “Faggis, I expect you up at the House at sharp two-thirty, or you do no deal with me to-day. Is that quite clear to you?”

“As daylight, Governor,” said Faggis.

“Then remember it. Hold on, Hetty! Take that, Satan’s Aunt!—and get along with you!”

And leaning over the apron to lash the mare viciously across the withers, wrenching at her bit as though determined to dislocate her jaw, the Grower and the mare and the gig were gone, in a cloud of dust intermingled with stinging chips of road-metal. And with them a black-eyed young lady some years older than Stephen,—of whose presence, buttoned in as she was beside the Grower’s bulky figure, under the leathern gig-apron, he had previously not been aware.

“You see ’oo Old Greedy Grabguts ’as got stuck up alongside ’im?” asked the potman of the hawker, as the cloud of dust subsided with the rattle of hoofs and wheels.

“The young female——” hinted Faggis. “Can’t say as I noticed partic’ler.”

“P’raps not, but you’d ’ave noticed more close if you’d ’ave bin me. That young woman—*or* young gal—her being no more than seventeen according to the general notion, is—What might be the name for the crooked stick—same as boys pitch to bring apples down off of the topmost branches?” Stephen reddened and grinned at this reference, possessing a talisman of the kind. “But different shaped,” continued the potman, “being what the Savages of Horsetralia uses in their Battles.”

“Strike me pink if I ever heard!” asseverated Mr. Faggis.

“I’ve seed it in the pictur’ Papers—relating to them

Savages. And being threw with a twist-like, it comes back to the Savage as throwed."

"Similar to a Fishing Line I once tried my hand at casting of, on the Fancy Sheet of Water at the 'Endon Welsh 'Arp. And the way it doubled back on itself, and winded round my scrag-like, couldn't have been beat by no Savage, I'm ready to make oath."

"'Ark 'ere!" said the potman, breathing hard. "Wot's the name of that 'Merican female as Rampages about Guyed up in Pantaloons, holding meetings to bring other females round to make similar Guys of theirselves? Give her name—and you gives me the word."

"Blow-Me-Tight! if I can tell you!" said Faggis.

"Her——" said the potman, breathing harder, and punctuating his utterances by rapping on the barrow-shaft with the bottom of the pint-pot, "as Rampages about Guyed up, persuading other females—Stop! I've got it. Bloomer were her name! And similarly the other word were Bloomerang! Now 'ark 'ere! That young party sitting in the gig along of Old Grabguts—is a Bloomerang what come back to him seventeen years ago."

"She's his daughter, you mean," said Faggis, "on the wind'ard side o' the blanket?"

"Mister, take it she is an' she isn't," returned the potman, rubbing his nose, and cautiously lowering his voice. "She ain't the daughter of his wife, which is living with him over to Wheatstone. though she is—do any doubt it!—the half-sister of his son. She came Bloomeranging to Grundall's gate, one Christmas-tide seventeen year back. In a Hamper. Brought by the Carrier. And marked 'Perishable. For Immediate Delivery.'"

"If I know anything about Kids—in Hampers or out of 'em—the Carrier would have a-heerd it squeal,—supposing him not to be deaf. Though o' course he might a-bin paid to be," commented Faggis.

"I dunno'," said the potman, "nothing about that. An' precious little about kids. But give 'em gin or Daffy enough and they'll sleep round the clock—if you wants 'em. That night I——" He stopped, reddening about the gills. "Is that Boy of yours a-listening?" he asked.

“Not 'im!” asseverated Faggis. “Why, wot put that in your cokernut?”

“He looked round sharp-like,” said the potman, cautiously lowering his voice.

And Stephen, who had been silently wondering how such a robust young lady as Miss Hetty could have been got into a hamper at any period of her existence, knew himself the object of scrutiny on the part of both the men. And rounded his shoulders to lumpishness, and assumed the mask of stolidity that had helped him to do the Enemy's work, times and times again.

A few months back he would not have known how to listen while appearing not to, and stow away the points of a dialogue which he seemed too dull to understand. But the gossip of the potman of the 'Braby Arms' had quickened his curiosity. He made up his mind to hear the rest of what Chewey had got to tell.

“Supposing you, Joe Chewey, to make reference to a Party not now present,” said Faggis, “my belief is as that Party, if he listened—which he may 'ave or may not!—couldn't put Two and Two together sufficient to make Four on 'em. But 'avin' formed opinions, be mum, or tip us the gag.”

“Well then,” said the appeased Mr. Chewey, shielding his mouth with the pint-pot, which precaution guided his utterances more directly to the other's ear: “when the old gent at Brabycott House fell out wi' Miss Ann, his daughter, and sent for Grundall Senior to make another Will——”

“Woa, Smiler!” B. Faggis flicked the prad with the whip, and checked him for being restive—being rendered somewhat restive himself by the rapid passage of time. “Well, an' wot about the Will? Cackle, my bird, I'm waitin'.”

“'Twere becos' of Miss Ann's Gallivantings along of a Married Party, by who I mean the Grower, as is son of Grundall Son. He were then Third Partner in the Firm, as you're aware of,” said the potman, “an' the Gallivanting had gone funder than the old gent suspicioned then. Even when he drawed up the draft o' the Will, Cutting Miss Ann off proper, wi' a Hundred Pound per hannum

to be paid 'arf yearly out of the Estate, and leavin' the House an' the Money an' the Land to the son he'd driven from him——"

"Meanin' the father of the Sharp-eared Party you mentioned of just now?"

"The identical same!" Mr. Chewey lowered the pint-pot to take a stare at Stephen, who flushed and wriggled uncomfortably under this scrutiny. "He don't favour the Brabys," said the potman critically. "Being big-boned, fair and blue-eyed, while they're black-eyed, saller and short."

"He takes arter his mother, as spanking a woman as ever I set eyes on," said Faggis,—“or ever shall, I'm ready to bet. And Handsome is the word!"

"So I've heerd. But a-going back to this as have been mentioned betwixt us—no sooner had the Will leaving everything to Miss Ann bin' Proved than Miss Ann she vanished. Along of her maid Sophy Petcher, and come back in Six months or thereabouts, saying from Foreign Parts . . . But two months afore she so came back, the Hamper 'rived for Grundall,—him having broke with his father, Grundall Junior—and his grandfather—which was Grundall Senior—and pitched over the Law. And set up with his wife in a house on some land he bought on th' outer skirts of Wheatstone, which gradooal his property have growed as he have done."

"An' how did he take the Hamper? Cussing, I'd expect of him," inquired Mr. Faggis, politely smothering a yawn.

"He cussed and raved a bit, they say, and then sent for a woman, being wife of one of his gardeners, and suckling a child of her own at the time; and give it her to rear."

"Might have done worse!" commented Faggis.

"You'd look to him for that," said Mr. Chewey, "but he might ha' done better than fetch it home to his own house arter it were weaned of, to be brought up along of his lawful kids as he'd had by his married wife. She may ha' took it hard or not, her likings was nothing to Grundall! Though being a easy-going body, she bore no grudge agin the child. So Miss Hetty—as they call her that for short—her being christened 'Ester——" ended the potman,

“Miss Hetty have growed up,—and what’s more, she’ve growed to be the spit and image of Miss Ann!”

“Which though often near the House in her lifetime I never—not to know it!—seed her,” said Faggis, spitting over the side of the barrow, and preparing to drive on.

“If you’d been born at the Lodge, like me,—and bin’ boot-boy at th’ House at eleven,—and seen Miss Ann in her tantrums and her moods—and suffered by the same,” said the potman, rapping the pint-pot on the footboard of the barrow, “you’d be at no loss to ticket of Grower Grundall’s barstard wi’ th’ rightful name of her mother, whatever they calls the gal! That mother lies in Tolleymead Churchyard, and what she were’s forgotten, ’cept by a few as knowed her,—like that old man as is dead. And Garvis the butler, but he’s dead too; and Mrs. Whicher as were housekeeper-cook, and her daughter and niece as were housemaids, and have gone away to the Colonies—and Sophy Petcher and me!”

“And her brother, that pore Swipey Cove,” said Faggis, polishing his nose on his coat-cuff, “which is parent to the sharp-eared Young Customer we was speaking of just now. What queers me, is why Petcher—not mentioning of the rest of the servants—didn’t put ’im up to a Move or two in connection with Hampers and such? Not that it ’ud ha’ changed the Will into the one they lost of. But it might ha’ helped him put on the screw to the tune of a Thousand Pound.”

“Because none of ’em know’d for certain fact ’cept Petcher,” owned the potman, “and she were as close as a Bramah Safe—unless she were in a Wax. Sometimes she’d get in a Regular One, and come down to our place quite raging,” he indicated the ‘Braby Arms’ with a backward jerk of his head, “and give Mrs. Shooter to understand as to up and blow the gaff on Miss Ann, she’d quite made up her mind to. But she changed it again, and took back what she’d said, each time—being proper well bribed!”

“And what’s gone of Petcher now?” demanded Mr. Faggis.

“She’s in service at the Grower’s,” replied the man of pots, “ever since Miss Ann’s Funeral. As she went to be

nurse to Miss Hetty at first, and then took on as House-keeper."

"Not bein' well paid by 'er master?" hinted Faggis, winking significantly.

"Ho, no!" responded the potman, winking even more significantly, and laying the empty pint-pot against the side of his nose.

"'Course not," responded Faggis. "Couldn't be thought on nohow. Funny old world we lives in, ain't it, and no mistake." He continued, abruptly stemming the flow of the potman's further experiences, "Well, by-bye, my codger! Keep 'appy till I see you agin. Where's that 'ere Bosom Friend o' mine I give you to fill with Stingo? For I 'ave to do business with the Governor, and will want a drain when I've done!"

Upon which, the flat green bottle being produced, filled with guaranteed Stingo, the hawker paid and pocketed it, and bidding the potman farewell, nudged Stephen, telling him to wake up, laid the whip to the dozing pony, and pushed on in the direction of Brabycott House.

"I reckon you piped what that 'ere bloke blabbed, though you played Dick Dull," said Faggis, when the posting-inn had been left in the rear a hundred yards or more. "But you be mum and shut your trap 'case any of his talk leaks out agin. The Governor's your landlord, mind, an' a nasty one to wex."

"I'll be careful, sir," returned Stephen. "You can trust me not to blab, sir."

"'Ope so," said Faggis. "Though there's such a thing as bein' too bloomin' fly. I 'eard a tale or two at 'The Pure Drop' as I wouldn't like my Missus to git 'earin'. Are 'em true, Young Shaver, or ain't 'em? Take an' spit it out."

"I'm afraid they're true," said Stephen. "Don't tell Mrs. Faggis, will you, sir? I couldn't help myself anyway. It wasn't my wish to go."

Faggis grunted and looked at the boy sideways before he answered:

"Right. We'll not worry the Missus. But wot about your mother? Hay?"

Stephen groaned out, clenching his fists till the knuckles showed white against their brownness.

"She knows as I wasn't willin', but she durstn't interfere, sir."

"Phew! A pretty Kettle of Fish you're in," admitted Faggis, flicking the pony, "and Blow-me-tight if I can see how you're goin' to git out. An' though not overgiven to slack-jor, Shaver, I 'adn't expected it of you."

'It,' as Stephen knew, meant carrying poached birds and rabbits and hares.

"And Shavers as foller them persoots don't long keep out o' Chokey, as the Blokes they work for cuts away, an' leaves 'em to face it by theirselves. Now you know my views on the pint and my Missus's would match 'em. But here's the Lodge o' Brabycott House and here's the Gates, and the Carriage-Drive. An' whether I done wrong in bringin' you or not, Perish me if I know!" said Faggis. "But at the same time Bust me if I didn't mean you well!"

4

The prad and the barrow with the man and the boy turned in between huge rusty lodge-gates, standing open, and presided over by a little empty lodge; and rattled up a long straight carriage-drive bordered by elms and flowering chestnuts, and overgrown with grasses, nettles and other weeds. Narcissi and purple iris bloomed in clumps under the shelter of overgrown rhododendrons, flaunting magnificent trusses of mauve and crimson bloom. Lilacs were blossoming everywhere, and tall glossy-leaved Portugal laurels opened their almond-scented sprays of flowers in the genial warmth of the sun. Here rooks were building in the tops of the elms, or brooding on nests new-finished, their blackness tinged with violet against the turquoise blue of the sky. And blackbirds and robins and thrushes were singing melodiously. And a stoat slipped across from bank to bank of the neglected carriage-drive, and a gaunt and ragged-looking cat, possibly the wild descendant of some bygone kitchen favourite, ran nimbly up a mossy trunk,

carrying a squeaking sparrow, and vanished down a gaping hole where the tree forked, high overhead.

And then the avenue ended, in the gaunt desolation of Brabycott. The House faced south-west and was great and square, with many crowperch gables, and was built of old red brick, faced with creamy-yellow freestone, in the style that Stephen, long years after, learned to know as Jacobean. A broad paved terrace edged with a sunk wall and set with neglected yew-trees stretched before the blinded windows that stared like blank, dead eyes in the face of the noonday sun.

Contrary to Stephen's expectation Mr. Faggis did not check the pony. He drove on and passed the hall-door, which was on the north-west side of the house. A high brick wall covered with fruit-trees, well pruned and in a flourishing condition, ran out from the end of the north-west side, and had in it an open carriage-gate. The pony trotted in at this gate, and they were in a great stable-yard. And in the yard,—which was enclosed by coach-houses, offices and stables—Grower Grundall's high-wheeled gig stood leaning on its shaft-ends, and Grower Grundall's raw-boned black mare could be heard kicking and plunging in one of a row of neighbouring loose-boxes, as though she were possessed with a furious desire to kick herself to death.

“Hark at her! Satan's Aunt he called her, you remember? Blimed if I don't by 'arf believe there's somethink in the name. Gimme Smiler's nosebag from the back o' the barrow,” said Faggis, concealing his pony's countenance with the article referred to, “and 'ave a look round the place if you wants, while me an' the Grower 'as a jor. The garden's 'tother side o' that wired gate you sees the key a-sticking in. But don't you get touching of no flowers, nor no grapes, nor yet no peas nor strawberries in none o' the houses. For the Governor'd find out, and then you'd be Uncommon sorry for yourself.” He added as Stephen nodded his head to show he heard the warning; and shook it to intimate that he would not touch, whatever the temptation might be, and clumped off in his clumsy ploughboy's

boots to the wired gate, and went through it: "Though blow me if I knows the boy who 'as a better right!"

"And who's the boy who has the right to trespass here at Brabycott?" demanded the Grower's roaring voice at the back of the hawker's head.

"You crop up so oncommon quiet, Governor," said Mr. Faggis, wheeling to meet Grundall's bloodshot glare, "that you ketched me talking to myself. Like a kid or a old woman, I dunno' which. As to the boy, you knows him! No blindin' of your eyes, Governor. Back a goodish while upon the road you knowed. You can't gammon Me!"

"And if I knew—and I haven't owned I did—why have you brought him over?" demanded the Grower, slightly mollified by the implied compliment.

"Pre'aps to let him see his grandfather's house—and I don't say that's the reason neither!—before it passes for ever away into a stranger's hands. More like," said Faggis, "'cos I wanted a boy to keep an eye on the barrer in case you might be wishful to call me into the house."

"The yard's good enough for a chap like you, and the company you carry," retorted the Grower, stinging with both thongs of the double intent. "I've had the things that are for sale put in the smaller coach-house. There's some rattletraps from the old nursery, and a pair o' globes from the library, and an escritoire and a coal-scuttle and a screen, and a big old library chair. Enough to load you, I should say, without the stuff you carry. And, as I've got no time to waste, come in and look at 'em."

He kicked open the door of a coach-house near, which stood ajar, and they went in. Stephen on the other side of the wall could hear the bullying voice of the Grower and Faggis's husky tones replying, until he moved out of earshot and forgot all else in the joy of this new place.

The garden—a great, square space within high brick walls, covered with cherry and peach and plum,—was in apple-pie order, strangely contrasting with the neglect and decay evident elsewhere. Tufts of wallflower and narcissi and hyacinths and clumps of bronze and purple iris, anemones violet and crimson and pink, and tulips of parrot-

gay hues, peonies blood-red or snowiest white, peopled the moist, well-cultivated soil under the gooseberry and currant bushes, their leafy boughs already hung with fruit of topaz and jade.

Across the middle of the garden ran a triple row of glass-houses. No gardeners were visible, it being the dinner-hour. . . . Stephen tiptoed to a greenhouse and peeped inside it. It was full of carnations, rose and pink, lifted and potted in September, flowering beautifully still, though April had seen them bloom. . . . Paddington Beauty, and Astin's Lady Paget; Galatea and Roi des Roses; ranged in orderly platoons upon well-ventilated stages, with a dozen other beauties that have other names to-day. He moved away and from a ground-frame a wave of violets washed over him, making him think of his mother who worshipped violets. . . . And then through the doors of a forcing-house that stood open to let in the sunshine, yet stronger invitations streamed, and Stephen was dragged thither by the nose. He opened the door a little wider yet—slipped in—partly closing it after him—and stood between the cinder-beds, too stunned to do more than stare.

For the forcing-house, some fifty feet long by twenty-three wide or thereabouts—its glass shaded with Astin's green, its height about nine feet to the roof—was filled with Roses in blossom. 'Lou Buckleys' of pale silvery pink, growing upon their own roots in beds of well-mixed leaf-mould, with a path of clean slag and crushed cinders running up between the beds. And the heart and the eyes of the boy were filled with the glory of their beauty and colour, and his nose was tickled and delighted with the sweetness of their smell.

"'Tis 'Lou Buckley,'" Stephen stammered, his mouth and eyes wide open, and the heart under his hunkumed smock thumping with ecstasy. He looked at his worshipped one and longed, and she, the coquette and charmer, looked back at him and sent forth a stream of fragrance that drowned his soul.

"I mustn't," said Stephen, struggling in the waves that swirled deliciously about him: "I mustn't do it—and yet I must! 'Tis as if she telled me to!" He slipped his hand

underneath his smock, and fumbled in a breeches' pocket, and brought out an ancient one-bladed knife, and opened it recklessly with his teeth; "I mustn't do it—an' yet I must!" he whispered to himself in agony, as he looked about for the loveliest bloom within his covetous reach. . . . "And I will do it!" He planted a toe upon the border of the cinder-bed, and braced both soul and body to commit the frightful act. . . .

The wild blood dinning in his ears, and his guilty heart's drub-drubbing drowned the creak of the swinging hothouse door, and the footsteps at his back. Even as the knife blade severed the green stalk of Lou Buckley, and she fell into Stephen's reverent clutch, Retribution fell on him. . . .

"You thief! . . . You filthy little thief! . . ." A small hand grabbed him by the scruff, and a shower of stinging buffets and smacks accompanied the shower of epithets. "You nasty, dishonest little brute, where do you expect to go to? Uncle Greg! Here's one of the village boys robbing the forcing-house!"

"Leggo!" Half-throttled by the strenuous twist of the grip upon his neck-band, and dazed by the vigorous buffets which continued to salute his ears, Stephen was only conscious that his treasure was in peril. . . . "You leggo, whoever you be! Don't you see as how you'll make me spile her?" he added, and, with a sudden duck and twist, tore himself free and faced round.

Faced to confront the giver of the slaps with which his ears were tingling. A short, strongly-built, black-eyed young lady in a maroon cloth dress, much frilled and flounced, and a fur-trimmed jacket to match. With a hat of bright blue velvet displaying the tail of a pheasant, said hat being balanced on a mound of hair, ending in a waterfall of curls. A young lady with a narrow sallow face (at the moment flushed with exercise) whose black eyes were too small, and set too near a large and heavy nose. Whose jaw was too square, and whose mouth too straight, to mean anything but Will and Temper; and who reminded Stephen, oddly enough, of some one he had never seen. . . .

"George Hoggam! Abel! . . . One of you." As she turned the head with its flamboyant hat to shriek for ab-

sent gardeners, Stephen knew her from the rearward view for the Grower's companion in the gig. "I've told Uncle Greg again and again that when the men go to dinner——" She petulantly pulled out a gold Swiss watch at the end of a gold neck-chain, and tossed her head as she thrust back the watch, until her long gold ear-rings and her coarse black curls made you giddy by the way they dangled and swung. "I've said over and over that somebody should be left to keep an eye on the gardens. . . . You village boys are always such dishonest little toads!"

As her ear-rings and her curls swung round again, Stephen recalled the Hamper, and wondered how these feathers and flounces and curls could have been got into so small a space. For you couldn't picture Miss Hetty as ever having been a baby. And yet, he supposed there had been a time—and caught himself wanting to laugh.

"You, Boy!" she demanded, stamping a foot, daintily small and well shod, and by far the greatest attraction that this domineering young lady possessed. "What's your name, and where do you live? Look me in the face and answer unless you want to be given in charge and taken to prison by the Police."

"There's no Police hereabouts," returned Stephen, looking at her squarely.

"There are, there are, there Are!" said Miss Hetty, waxing exceedingly shrill.

Stephen knew that she was lying, because the Tolleymead and Brabycott constable had been off duty and digging in his garden when Faggis had driven past. That he was now comfortably having his tea, with his wife and the eldest baby, was on the verge of certainty, unless he had had a call.

"I've said there are Police and there are Police. We keep them on the premises. And bloodhounds and man-traps and spring-guns," shrieked Miss Hetty, "for thieves who come to steal. Don't dare to grin at me like that!" Stephen hadn't known he was grinning. "What is your name and where do you live, you wicked little brute?"

"I lives over to Tolleymead, and my name be Stephen

Braby," Stephen told her, stealing a glance at the rose that reminded him of a sweeter face.

"Where did you get that name?" demanded Miss Hetty, frowning. "Don't shuffle, but look me straight in the face if you can, and mind you speak the truth!"

"I reckon——" began Stephen, wearying of her and her temper and her frills and feathers.

"Don't reckon!" she snapped at him, tapping the ground with a small imperious foot.

"I 'spect I got it from my father," amended Stephen.

"And who's your father?" bounced Miss Hetty.

"He's Mr. Wilfrid Braby of th' Wheatacres, Tolley-mead."

The black eyes were on Stephen's, with a jeering mockery in them.

"And did your father send you here to steal my uncle's flowers?"

"He didn't," said Stephen, quivering at the stab. "He never knowed I come here. An' I reckon my mother she'd Hammer me if I told her where I'd been."

"Humph! If I let you keep that rose, what will you give me?" asked the young lady.

"I've got nothin'," said Stephen wistfully, glancing at the treasure in his hand. "I might gi' you my *Robinson Crusoe*. No!—that belongs to my father."

"So you won't rob your father," sneered Miss Hetty, "though you've robbed my Uncle Greg?"

A hot flush raced over Stephen, beginning between his shoulders. He set his teeth, and looked boldly at the owner of the sharp black eyes. . . .

"My father were born in Brabycott House, and th' place belonged to his father. It's more like as you and Grower Grundall came stealing roses here!"

"My Uncle bought and paid for the place, and all that's in it belongs to him. But you"—the black eyes glittered queerly—"shall have that rose for a kiss. Do you hear me, Stephen Braby?"

"Ay! . . ."

"Then what do you say? . . . Answer! . . ."

Stephen's narrowed blue eyes considered her, from the covert of their black-lashed lids. His old cloth cap had fallen off when she pounced on him to buffet him, and his curls, the colour of reddish wheat, stood on end all over his head. Giving him an air akin to one of Blake's exultant cherubim, whose locks are blown back and upwards by the Wind that is the Breath of the Divine. His nose being snubby at this time, we will not dwell upon it. But possibly his firm red mouth with the quirk in each deep-cut corner suggested the idea of kissing to Hetty Grundall's mind.

He wanted the Lou Buckley in his hand more than all his world could give him. . . . But to kiss Miss Hetty Grundall. . . . Something in him whispered "No!" He looked at the flower wistfully, and then with a painful effort, laid it down on the edge of the parent pot and picked his cap from the ground.

"So you won't? All right, you little toad!" The black eyes glittered angrily.

"No, Miss!" said Stephen simply.

"And why won't you?"

"I'd rather not say!"

She burst out laughing and caught him roughly round the neck, and kissed him on the mouth. He struggled in the hateful hug, for her breath was not sweet like his mother's, and her lips were dry and burning, and he shrank from the touch of them. He had rather the bar-maid at the cross-roads public-house had kissed him, since kissing there must be. But Hetty was strong and determined, and you couldn't hammer a girl!

Finally she thrust him against the greenhouse door and kissed him until she wearied. Then she released him and, pointing to the rose, roughly told him to take it, and go.

"And don't come sneaking here again. Now, then, ske-daddle!"

And Stephen with a swelling heart moved away—without the rose. He heard Hetty's shrill voice call to him, and glanced back over his shoulder, to see her wrench Lou Buckley's head from its calyx of tender green. Next moment the flower struck him on the face and tumbled on

the garden pathway; and that fragrant missile hurt him so that he fairly burst out crying, threw up his arm to hide his eyes, and shamefully ran away.

5

Miss Hester Grundall, or Hetty as one may call her, made no effort to pursue Stephen, though he heard her singing after him as he fled from the scene of his defeat:

“Cry, Baby, Cry,
Put a finger in an eye——”

had given place to the other rhyme about “Cowardy, cowardy Custard who stole his mother’s mustard”—by the time Stephen reached the wired gate, and dodged through it to the stable-yard. Where Grower Grundall and Faggis could be heard engaged in bargaining over the various articles deposited in the small coach-house for sale.

Divers of these articles had already changed owners. To wit, a copper coal-scuttle green with ancient verdigris, and a brass fender and fire-screen, much in the same state; a child’s cot, once painted blue, now faded to uniform drabness; and a pair of globes, mounted in mahogany frames on casters, the Terrestrial sphere badly patched with mildew in the region of North America, and its Celestial brother similarly afflicted, much to the hurt of certain of the sprawling mythological figures representing the Signs of the Zodiac.

There were in addition a battered walnut escritoire with many drawers, and very few handles, and a shabby brown-leather-covered easy-chair of most capacious size. These two articles being objected to by Mr. Faggis as occupying the unsaleable border-line between Modern and Antigreek.

“Come, come, man!” said the Grower, hectoringly, as Stephen lingered near the threshold. “Don’t pitch me that stale old story about robbing your family. Make an offer for the chair and the other thing, or leave ’em for another. My time is worth too much to waste on Hawkers, d’ye see?”

“It’s like this, Mister, don’t you twig,” objected Mr. Faggis, wiping his square red face with the ends of his bright silk neckerchief. “If this here Heskitore, and that there Chair ’ad bin made when our Most Gracious was trollin’ a Noop in a Poke Bunnit, and lace-edged pantaloons, they’d a’ bin wot’s called Modern,—and I could see my way to selling of ’em, to young folks lately Married, an’ Furnishing a Nouse on the cheap. Likewise if they ’ad ’ave come to shape in the times as you ha’ read of, when people Raddled their cheeks and stuck their ’eads in the Flour Tub, and the men wore dimond Eyebusters in the front o’ their gophered shirt-frills, an’ dimond buckles in their shoes, an’ silk stockin’s and satting smallclothes, I could sell of ’em as Antigreeks or Hire ’em out to Artisses, being Gorgeous—and there was Three Gorgeouses of that sort. But the other Gorgeous as come after ’em—what built the Pavilion at Brighting—the Puffy-faced Bloke with the Choker and Curls—he ain’t no manner o’ good! Too near he is and yet too far, as the Furnishing Couples don’t want ’im!—nor the Artisses—neither St. John’s Wood, Hampstead, Bayswater nor Chelsea—will touch him with”—Mr. Faggis had a flash of inspiration—“with the progging end of a Switzer Yelpingstock. Which being so, I should rob myself and likewise my Missus, if I offered you—for the Heskitore *and* the Chair—a penny over One Pun’ Ten.”

“Two pounds and they’re yours,” said Grundall, “with the other——” He was going to say ‘trash,’ but substituted “articles. For which you agreed to pay me Nineteen Shillings, you know.”

“Eighteen gen,” said Mr. Faggis promptly, “and not another mag, Governor.”

“Done with you then, and you take the stuff away with you,” said Grundall, as Faggis pulled out a leather bag and untied the string with his teeth. “They came out of the old man’s library,” he added, pocketing the money, “and my gorge gets up at the sight of ’em, particularly the chair.”

He looked all gorge as he said it, with his great red face, topped by the hat worn by John Bull in Tenniel cartoons, merging into the swollen crimson neck that was

swathed in a violet scarf. The gross belly of him, aggressively thrusting out the fronts of his drab cloth box-coat; and his bloated hands in knitted gloves; and his vast round calves bulging out over the mahogany tops of his top-boots, and the elephantine feet that filled those vast square-toed receptacles, completed such a picture of sensuality, greed, and coarse, unscrupulous cunning, that B. Faggis contemplated him with dubious admiration, and for Stephen he became the living realisation of the Ogre in the nursery rhyme about Fee Faw Fum.

“Particularly the chair,” he went on, “though it cost a pretty penny, and you’ve got it dirt-cheap, my codger, as you know as well as me. For the Old Man died in it,” said the Grower,—“and though I didn’t see him, I could pretty well guess what he looked like, even if I hadn’t been told.”

“That was a rummy start, that was!” said Faggis, dusting the leather,—which had a well-marked grain in it—with a ragged carriage-cloth. “Over seventeen year ago, it were—and judging by the look of him, I’d have laid a dollar on his chance of living to this ’ere day. A bit bluish about the dial he might ha’ been; and short-winded in speaking, which is what my Missus noticed at the time, or so she tells me now. But with your experience of females, Governor,” said Mr. Faggis, politely, “you’re aware that their sharpness in having foretold events as is going to happen, is all of a piece with their closeness in keeping ’em dark till they’ve come off.”

“Your wife was with you here, I know, that last day of the old man’s lifetime,” said the Grower, fixing his prominent eyes upon the hawker’s face. He stuffed a great hand into a pocket of his coat, and said, swinging a heavy hunting-crop he usually carried, with the other; and tapping with its leather loop on the mahogany top of his boot, “Now, Faggis, my man, between yourself and me, have you got anything to add to that Deposition you dictated and signed and swore for those lawyers in Furnival’s Inn? If so, let’s have it, off the reel. It’ll be useful to me at present. And in return I’ll put something in your way that’ll be of use to you!”

“Much obliged, Governor,” acknowledged Faggis, without any great heartiness, however.

“The Chancery Case was a twelvemonth old, a mere Baby of a Chancery Case,” said Grundall, “when my grandfather—dead now, but a sharp old fox!—chanced to get wind of a tale that the Will he’d drafted and sent out here by his clerk on the Fourteenth of August, 1855, had been duly signed by old Braby in the presence of and witnessed by, a pair of travelling hawkers, a man and woman who were in the way of buying the rubbish here.”

“You’ve got it pat enough, Mister,” said Faggis with a touch of sulkiness, “and being so, I says once more, as there’s nothink to put to that! We come, we signed, and we padded the ’oof as soon as it were anyway possible, and having bin paid for our trouble, we put it out of our ’eads.”

“Tusser, Worrill & Stickey of Furnival’s Inn, Solicitors for Wilfrid Braby,” said the Grower, wagging his great double chin, and rapping his boot with his crop, “interrogated you, Faggis and your wife, and took your Depositions at their office in the November of 1858. Now, with regard to these statements of yours——”

“Which we took our Oaths to, Governor,—if you’re hinting as we kep’ anythink back,” said Mr. Faggis, “you’re wrong! Me kissing of the Book and not my cuff, nor my Missus her knuckle or thumbnail, and speakin’ the truth, an’ the whole truth, as we was pledged to do.”

“But something you didn’t swear to,” said the Grower with pouncing suddenness, “whether either of you saw where the Will was put when duly signed and so forth? Or whether you were accessories to its being hidden away somewhere? Or whether you didn’t take it——”

“Steal it, you means!” retorted Faggis.

“I mean what I say,” roared the Grower, purpling to the rim of his hat. “Don’t put words in my mouth, my man, or you’ll be sorry for it! I ask whether or no you took the Will, with Braby’s knowledge, to keep for him? He had been queer in his ways o’ late—every one agreed to that!”

“Lord strike my dear old Missus and me as dead as

Mr. Braby is!—and he's pretty near Dust by this time," said Faggis, "as I should judge!—if we ever was asked to take the Will, or see him hide it anywhere, or heard him as much as drop a hint of hiding of it away! Look you here! How my Missus came with me that day were part an accident,—her being a widder not long made, and still wearing blacks. And being out o' spirits and low in her mind, along of her First One dying, I'd persuaded her—having my 'Opes for by and by—to come on a Round with me. In the identical Barrer which you see waiting outside there. Me driving a Mule in it them days, named Scruncher, being given to Bite."

The Grower nodded, taking a great hand out of the pocket of his box-coat, rubbing a mottled ear with it, and putting it back again.

"At East Marnet," went on Faggis, "meeting a Party as we knowed in the Hay and Fodder line,—we heard from him as two of the grooms at Brabycott have got the Sack. And that some business is like to be done in truckle-beds and deal chests o' drawers, and washstands from the loft-rooms where the outdoor-servants used to sleep—over the Stables there."

In pointing towards the party-wall, dividing the coach-house from the stables, these together forming the south-east side of the great deserted yard, the hawker prodded with his thumb almost directly at the stomach of the Grower; who wagged his chin, confirming so far the statements that had been made.

"They kep' us a good while a-waiting in this here blooming Stable-yard," said Faggis, "for old Mr. Braby druv' his bargains for hissself, for fear of being Done. So I puts on Scruncher's nosebag, and me and my Missus 'as a peck out of her basket, and a drop o' Swipes likewise for to carry of it down. At last we hears the front door bang, and a Fly as had bin' standing afore it—hired from the Tipping Marnet Arms—us knowing the Bloke on the box!—went rattlin' down the kerridge-drive,—and I nudges of the Missus, seeing old Mr. Braby come a-walking into the Yard."

"Not looking at all as though Old Bones was grinning

at his elbow?" asked the Grower, chafing with his big gloved hand at the other ear this time.

"A bit lead-coloured about the Dial and pouchy under the eyes he were. And short in the Puff—but no more nor he'd bin the fust time as I set eyes on 'im. And I'd called here regular three times a year," said Faggis, "for rising five year. Ever since I'd set up in business in Lower 'Olloway."

"He broached the business of witnessing the Will unexpectedly, Hay?" said the Grower, taking the thong of his hunting-crop from between his big yellow teeth.

"So help me, Jimmy Johnson, Governor!" responded Mr. Faggis, "he give neither myself nor my Missus a single whiff of what he'd got at the back of his mind. He took us up the ladder, and then he says,—a-showing that he'd got a folded Parchment stowed in his inside-pocket like,—'There's a table here, and a pen and ink. Oblige me by witnessing this Document. . . . Stop though! If you're man and wife I don't know as wot it's legal,' he says, 'and shall 'ave to call across the yard, and get my coachman in.' So I tells him as we're not married yet,—my Missus blushing a good 'un, and we're ready for to oblige him, her being a bit of a Scholar, though I'm no shakes at a Screeve."

"Meaning that she could write and spell, and you could too, but badly?" (The Grower swallowed back a curse and substituted) "Very well. Go on!"

"We got to the end here, Governor," said Mr. Faggis, mopping his now perspiring face with unaffected relief. "He buttons up the Will inside his coat, though not so careful as formerly—and he clinches the bargain for the hods an' hends, an' I hands over the shigs. And he goes down the ladder and back to the house. And I carries down the Furnitur', my Missus lending a nand-like with the Pillers an' mattrasses an' such. And we loads up and drives back to my place at Lower 'Olloway. And it might be two days arter as I reads on the front of a daily noospaper: 'On August Fourteen, at Brabycott, Hertfordshire; Geoffrey Thomasson Braby, aged Seventy-three. This is inserted by his sorrowing daughter. No Flowers, by request.'"

“And that’s all you can tell? Or will tell?” blustered the Grower. “Regarding the Will, which subsequently disappeared. Though I say to you on my solid oath.—Give me the tip where it’s to be found—a nod’s as good as a wink to a blind horse!—and you’ll have done the most profitable day’s work you ever did in your life.”

“Gosmejudge if me or my Missus could give you a tip to go by,” said Faggis emphatically, “an’ that’s the solemn truth.”

“Very well!” said the Grower, with large drops starting on his great red countenance. “That’s your last word. Now take your traps, and get to Hell with you!”

“Arter you, Mister,” returned the hawker, knuckling his front lock respectfully, a proceeding which, as it was calculated to do, increased the Grower’s ire.

“None of your insolence on my premises. . . . Be off with you!” champed Grundall, walking with his great stomach thrust out, squared elbows and arrogantly turned-out toes from the coach-house back into the stable-yard. Here his bloodshot glare encountered Stephen, meekly sitting on an upturned basket, and he fell upon this new victim with: “You, boy, what business have you here?”

“’Asting your pardon, that boy is mine!—leastways for the present!” said Faggis. “You lend us a hand, Shaver, an’ we’ll histe these movables aboard.”

So what time the Grower, following his stomach in his own arrogant fashion, square-toed back to the gate in the garden-wall, to meet a brace of gardeners coming back from dinner, and curse and bawl at the inoffensive men, until he bawled them pale, Faggis, shedding his plush waistcoat, and cheerfully helped by Stephen, proceeded to erect on the barrow a towering pile of movables, and lash them scientifically with sundry ends of rope.

“Now, Shaver, nip up and set in that chair,” commanded Mr. Faggis—the bulky article referred to having been secured right end up, “I dunno the bloke as ’as a better right,” he added, getting back into his sleeved pushed waistcoat, and uncorking the flat green bottle filled by the potman of the ‘Braby Arms’; “seeing as it was your grand-

father's, which the hold gen'l'man up an' died in it, an' an oncommon solid piece it is of genewine jinery."

"His grandfather's!" echoed a gardener, who, possibly magnetized by the bottle, had drawn near enough to overhear: "His grandfather's d'ye say? Why, then, that's Wilfrid Braby's son, from over to Tolleymead? Here! Trust and Sponder! Come you here an' take a look at this!"

Several other gardeners appearing in the yard on their way back from dinner, joining the speaker, Stephen perched aloft in the chair, by Mr. Faggis's command, underwent the anguish of being observed by four or five pairs of curious eyes, set in faces strange to him, and hearing the personal comments made by their various owners' tongues.

"He doesn't favour th' family overmuch, being that there blue-eyed and light-'aired!" commented one of the elders. "The Brabys being black as rooks, and as yeller-skinned as Injians."

"Th' mother be light-complected and a masterpiece to look at," said the gardener who had spoken first. "An' the boy takes arter she."

"'Andsome she is," said Faggis in a hoarse aside to the gardener, "and I knows a Marble Antigreek the spit of her, though wanting arms. But she ain't as 'andsome as she wos. Nor you couldn't expect it neither, with a Swipecy pardner like she's got, a-lathering her, in his tantrums, as I heard myself from Popplewell in the tap of 'The Pure Drop.' But you're right, my cove! The Shaver there is most oncommon like her. And his 'art being set on seeing the place, I brought him here to-day. And there you sets in your grandfather's chair, my Codger," wound up the hawker, raising his voice so as to be heard by the embarrassed boy. "Nor all the bellerings of all the Bulls from Brabycott to Wheatstone"—this side hit at the Grower evoked grins upon the faces of the bystanders—"won't serve to turn you out of it. Will 'em, Young Bendigo?"

"No, sir," responded Stephen.

"Don't you go to touch your cap to me!" said Faggis.

"Nossir!" said Stephen, with difficulty keeping his hand down.

"Nor yet again," said Faggis, who had partly emptied

the bottle, "don't you get a-calling of me 'Sir,' for you're a gentleman by Blood. Do you twig?" He wiped the neck of the bottle and passed it to the elderly gardener, inviting him, in Stingo from the 'Braby Arms,' to drink a Braby's health.

So great an impression was made this day on the boyish mind of Stephen, that for many years subsequent to the date the picture was vivid in his mind. Of the great brick-walled stable-yard, with only two dogs in the kennels; chirping sparrows hopping about the grass-edged cobblestones; the old red-brick, white stone-faced many-gabled house filling in a side of the enclosure. The rooks brooding and building in the overgrown tops of the elm-trees; the rows of stable-buildings, shut up and long disused; the empty cobwebbed coach-house, the prad and the hawker's barrow; laden with all the purchased things except the battered escritoire and, perched above the heads of Faggis and the group of staring gardeners, a blushing boy in a hunkumed smock, looking small enough on the roomy seat of an old-fashioned leather arm-chair. . . .

"For in liquor like this 'ere," said Faggis, to whose brain the Stingo may have mounted, "as is calculated to stimmylate the whiskers of youth and restore the wigour of Age, a toast like I'm goin' to give can be drunk, an' drunk with propriarity:—'Here's the 'elth of Stephen Braby, Gentleman, and Lover of Roses. An' may he Grow 'em on his own grounds in 'appy days to be!"

"'Ear, 'ear!" said the elderly gardener, elevating the stout green bottle, which might originally have held a quart, and taking a hearty swig.

"Pass it on," said the man who had spoken first. "Dang me, but I'll toast young Braby!"

"Finish the bottle among you, chaps," said Faggis, "while I tops my load. And 'ere's an' 'arf-dollar 'case it don't go round. There's more where that stuff came from." He tossed a florin to the nearest man, and caught up the walnut escritoire. "Git up in the barrer an' lend us a hand," he said to a would-be helper, "or hold it a minnit while I'm gittin' in. I'm more of a Lifter than you."

Swallowed in the depths of the roomy chair, Stephen forgot Faggis and the gardeners, so sweet a rose was flushing through the blue above the elms of the drive. He thought of Lou Buckley, and Miss Grundall who had scolded and slapped and kissed him; and wrinkled his nose at the memory of the kisses as much as the slaps. And then a huge and roaring voice broke in upon his reverie:

“You, Faggis! Haven’t I told you to clear away out o’ this?”

Leaning forward, and twisting his neck to the verge of dislocation, Stephen saw that Grundall had returned through the wired gate in the wall. Hetty was with him, hanging on his arm, sniffing a bunch of roses—Lou Buckleys every one of them, it seemed to Stephen’s eyes.

“Right yer are, Governor,” responded Faggis, striding from the shaft over the driver’s board, and signalling the volunteer who supported the escritoire. “We’re for the toby—which I means the ’igh-road. Flash Patter being contr’y to your likin’s. Are you stiddy on them pins o’ yours, young man? If so, Hoist away.”

“You Crunch, what the Devil are you doing there?” belowered Grundall so loudly and ferociously, that the gardener who supported the escritoire turned feeble at the knees, and the solid piece of old-world furniture he supported slid from his trembling clutches, and fell with a resounding crash on the stones of the stable-yard. The dogs chained to their kennels barked. A shout went up from the bystanders, Miss Hetty shrieked with laughter, and the roaring voice of the Grower was heard damning Crunch for a fool.

“Not ’arf such a one as some others I could name,” said Faggis, as the victim retreated. He jumped down to retrieve his damaged property, and Stephen coming to his assistance, they got the battered piece of furniture into the trap. “Ketch ’old o’ these drawers as ’ave tumbled out,” said Faggis, piling them on Stephen. “’Cripes! What’s that bloomin’ Parchment you ’ave there in your ’and?”

“I got nothink,” says Stephen, showing it, “but this long bit o’ Paper. There’s a double bottom to one o’ the

drawers, as got broke when it tumbled out. . . . No good of, be it?"

"Can't say for sure," said Faggis, handling the stiff parchment, his eyes being screwed to pin-points, his square red face quite pale. "But s'welp me, Taters, if—this being your chance, nottersay your father's—you don't 'ave it! Git back in the chair, an' hold on tight to that there bit o' writin'. Move out o' the road, chaps! 'Day to you!" And calling this warning to the bystanders, he jumped on the front board, and grabbing the reins, drove the prad through the stable-yard gate.

6

They were half-way down the carriage-drive where the rooks had left off building, and with subsiding croaks and caws were going early to bed; and the hawker was urging the prad with whip and voice to still more unusual efforts, when they heard pursuing footsteps behind them in the drive. Voices called to Faggis to stop; but to Stephen's mute astonishment, the hawker was obstinately deaf to these appeals. Indeed, he stimulated Smiler to redoubled exertions, and reaching the great rusty gates, wide open as when they had entered, rattled through, and pushed apace upon the homeward road.

In a brace of minutes as it seemed, they were out of sight of the gateway, and had passed and left the 'Braby Arms' some distance in the rear, when the rattle of wheels sounded on the road behind accompanying a horse's gallop. Nearer and more furious, until Faggis looking over his shoulder, and seeing himself gained upon by his pursuer, drew rein, and slackened speed.

"We're in sight of Pound's cottage anyway, and one copper's better nor nuffink. . . . Hear him cussing Blue Blazes," said Faggis, "an' leatherin' at the mare!"

And Stephen, rising on his knees, and peeping over the back of the chair, saw at the end of the long white road, narrowing away until it seemed to end in a flaming crimson sunset,—a galloping beast, and a rocking gig, and a figure

standing up in it, whose right arm rose and fell and rose like the piston of some machine. And the shadow of man and horse and gig, most strangely and wondrously lengthened, reeled giddily on before them as they rushed from that fire behind. . . .

“You Faggis! . . . Blast you! . . . Will you stop! . . . You’ve pulled up at last, have you?”

The foaming brute, maddened with pain, and the swerving rocking vehicle, and the Grower, purple-black instead of purplish red, were upon them with these words. . . .

“—Pulled up, Governor, getting the idear as you wanted to ’ave a word with me,” returned Faggis.

“You well know why, you pattering rogue and double-dealing Knave! Steady, you Spotted Plague, you! Now, Faggis, listen to me!”

He wrenched the mare on her haunches, and brought her to a standstill, with her scarlet nostrils blowing wide, and her fierce eyes wildly glaring, and her black coat flecked and dabbled with patches of snow-white foam.

“The men at my place—for which I have paid, out of money made by my grandfather and father, Twenty Thousand Pounds in cash to the Assessors in Chancery!—the men have a tale of a Will you have found in a drawer,—which is my property!”

“Which belongs to me, Governor,” said Faggis, “having paid cash for the same.”

“I mean the Will, if it is a Will, or whatever the document may turn out. The Devil take your fooling!” snarled the Grower, showing his fangs.

“You’re warm, ain’t you, Governor? But ’ard words breaks no bones, you know,” said the hawker, hardily. “Suppose, as I sees Policeman Pounds a-looking over his berry-bushes, that you lowers your voice a trifle, and stops flourishing your whip. . . . We’d come to a Nunderstanding quicker, I do assure you!”

“Very well, damn your impudence! Answer a question if you can, without beating about the bush or quibbling. You found a Document in that escritoire?”

“Not me, Mister. The young gentleman behind!”

“This gaping booby found it then.” The bloodshot eyes

rolled on Stephen. "Show me the document, will you? Let me have it in my hand!"

"Governor, excoose me!—knowing your objections to Cant talk and Flash patter—if I says to you: Not by no means. Nix, Governor, nix! . . ."

"Answer then. . . . Is this document the Will you saw signed by Braby in August 1855?"

"Governor, not to deceive you," said Faggis, "it are. Without a doubt. The Will."

"Then," said Grundall, altering his hectoring voice, and leaning with a hand, and something in the hand, on the seat-rail of the gig next Faggis, "how much will you take for it? Down. In Cash? Think before you answer, man! Look! In this pocket-book that I have in my hand are Six hundred pounds in Five Pound notes upon the Bank of England. I drew them from our Branch this morning. Take them, and give me the Will!"

"And if I takes 'em," said Faggis, "wot's to prewent you, Governor, from stoppin' the numbers o' them flimsies at the Bank, and swearing as I picked 'em up?"

"I'll pay you in solid sovereigns. . . . Wherever and whenever you'll take 'em. I'll give you a thousand, Faggis—only let me have the Will! It's buttoned up inside your vest," urged the Grower. "Out with it and take the money. Pluck up your courage, you damned fool, and take it, d'ye hear?"

His blackish-purple face, and his bolting eyes, which might have been sewn in with red worsted, and the foam that blobbed on his swollen lips, most horribly scared Stephen; and the paper he sat on seemed to burn like the surface of a red-hot stove. But he held to the chair with all his strength, and clenched his teeth to keep from shrieking, as the Grower leaned over the rail of the gig on the side that was next to Faggis, and made a motion with his great gross hand towards the other's breast.

"Listen, man! . . . For your own sake and your wife's!" spluttered Grundall, "take the money."

"We'll leave my Missus out o' this," said the hawker, savagely. "And keep your 'ands off of me, do you hear? Be warned, an' keep your hands orf! . . ."

“Will you? . . .”

“Not for Nix, I won’t. That’s my last word to you!”

“Then take this!” bellowed Grundall, thrusting back the bribe, and snatching up the driving-whip, shrieking: “This—and this—and this! And this!” as the lash hissed round Faggis’s head.

“Stop it, Mister! Do you hear!” shouted the hawker, guarding his face as best he might from the furious attack. And then there was a frightful scream, and gig and man shot past them,—and Stephen saw the great black mare ramping mad all over the high road. And heard a dashboard splinter and crack, and some heavy body falling with a dull thud! on the surface of the dusty-white road.

“My Gord!” Faggis cried out at that, and backed the prad upon the footpath, regardless of the rocking of the load of furniture; and Stephen, sickening at the sight, saw the black mare worrying the Grower, whose great, gross, senseless body, in its drab-coloured box-coat, looking less like a body than a giant sack of potatoes, she held by the scruff in her savage yellow teeth, and struck at with her fore-hoofs, as though determined to make an end of her torturer for good and all.

So from the chair on the barrow Stephen gaped in dismay at the spectacle; the gig yawing and bumping all over the road, and spilling out its cushions with each bump. And the mare, with her ears flattened viciously back, and one of her fierce eyes bleeding, shaking the Grower,—who was bleeding too—as a terrier shakes the life out of a rat.

Then Faggis shouted and ran in, and grabbed hold of the maddened animal’s bridle; and the Tollymead constable came clumping up, and hung on to the other side. And presently the mare stood still, sweating and champing as though the Grower’s blood tasted worse than she had expected—while Faggis with the help of Pounds, and one or two field-labourers who had appeared on the scene of the accident, carried Grundall’s gross insensible body into the constable’s cottage; while the other labourer, who could drive, rearranged the harness, climbed into the gig and bowled away for Wheatstone, to take the news to the Grower’s home, and bring a doctor back.

"Is Mr. Grundall hurted very bad?" inquired Stephen of the hawker, as, the Grower being deposited on the constable's bed in the care of the constable's wife, they took leave of the constable, who seemed to have missed the scuffle that had led to the accident, and getting back into the barrow again, turned the pony's head towards Tolleymead.

"So I should say myself, Shaver," returned Faggis not uncheerfully. "That bump on the road-metal bein' enough to bust 'is bread-basket. Without bein' bitten in the fleshy part o' the neck,—though 'is neck-wropper saved 'is scrag for 'im!—an' chipped in as many places as you'd number days in the week. Perish me pink!" exclaimed the hawker, in dismay, "if I haven't fergot that Parchment."

"It's buttoned inside my weskit, sir," said Stephen, patting his bulging chest.

"You got some Brains in that cokernut o' yours, as I guessed when fust I seed you," returned Faggis, tenderly fingering the bleeding weal that scarred across his cheek, "an' wotever your station in life may be, it won't be no worse for that, my cove. Not even if you sits as a Member in the 'Ouse of Parliament. Wot's your Old Man's lurk this time o' day? I wants a word along of 'im."

"My old man, sir?" inquired Stephen, opening astonished eyes.

"Yer Father, then," said Faggis, mopping with the sleeve of his plush waistcoat the blood from the whip-cut on his cheek. "What's his lurk about this time? 'Ome sweet 'Ome or 'The Pure Drop'?"

Stephen was quite certain that Braby would be at 'The Pure Drop.' So they drove there; but only to be informed, on the authority of Mr. Popplewell, that Braby had quitted the tap-room about half an hour earlier, in the company of a Breaker by the name of Mackilliveray.

"A Breaker of horses, might he be, or a Breaker o' Shops and Houses?" inquired Faggis.

"The Boy knows all about the chap," returned Mr. Popplewell. "One of a Gang of navvies, he is, employed on th' Great Northern Extension Works. And him and Braby being thick o' late, Braby may ha' took him home. But whatever's the matter wi' your face?"

“Nothin’ that a drain won’t better,” said Faggis, “so bring me out a shant o’ gatter.” He continued, when he had disposed of the beer, “Now, Shaver, we’ll strike for ’appy ’ome. Nip in when we gits there and tip your dad the wink as I’m wishful for a word with ’im,—while not wantin’ to give your mother a turn with this striperey mug o’ mine.”

As the hawker’s face was an ugly sight with the great red weal across it; and the ear that had shared in the cut of the whip had swollen to enormous size, Stephen, remembering that his mother had shrunk of late from kindred spectacles, nodded, and Faggis clucked to the prad and turned his head towards home.

It was close upon half-past five o’clock, and the splendour of the sunset had faded, though rose and golden tints were interfused with the dun grey haze in the south. As the prad and the barrow turned in upon the short stretch of rutted cartway, Stephen dropped to the ground and, sprinting ahead, jumped the garden gate and ran to the door.

7

The white climbing rose Malvina loved was flourishing and full of buds for Summer. It covered the wall on the right of the cottage-door and bushed above the lintel-beam. So low it hung its trailing sprays, that the fact that the door stood open was not noticed by Stephen until he stood on the step and lifted his hand to the latch.

A voice came out of the living-room, as Stephen set foot on the threshold. His mother’s. And the deep rumbling response came from no one but Mackilliveray. The harsh thin laugh that followed on the words was very certainly Braby’s. He looked in. A wood-fire burned between the hobs, and some preparations were afoot for the scanty meal that went by the name of supper, but the tea-kettle was boiling over and putting out the fire, and though Malvina stood quite near it, she did not seem to see. . . .

The Enemy lounged, smoking a cigar of the brand retailed by Popplewell, in the chintz-cushioned Windsor

chair that stood at the corner of the fire-place, a cheap yellow-painted bit of furniture, in base contrast with the old-fashioned four-post bed at the other side of the living-room. A stately piece of furniture in dark old polished mahogany, with twisted posts, a canopied top, and faded red moreen curtains trimmed with antique crochet-lace.

The place was tainted with the reek of the cigar, and the rough smell of the navy's moleskins, as by the odour of his short clay pipe, and two bottles which had contained stout. These, with the glasses from which the men had drunk, were mixed up with the loaf on its platter, and the tea-things on the table spread for the usual evening meal.

Tragedy was in the atmosphere of the single room where Stephen's world was centred. Malvina stood at the table-head with her back to the old-fashioned range. Standing thus, she faced Mackilliveray, whose bulky, powerful figure loomed large in the space that intervened between the table and the door.

She was pale under her sunburn and her oval cheeks showed sunken, though the wasting of her figure seemed less evident of late. She was quiet, being a woman not given to the use of gestures. But the passion of wrath that wrought in her blazed from her great grey eyes.

Stephen could not see Mackilliveray's face, but he could hear him breathing. The thick and heavy sound came in at each pause in Malvina's voice. . . . The square-built man with the bright red hair winced under her fierce contempt of him. His thick hide shuddered at each verbal thrust, as the bull's at the prick of the goad.

"Oncet an' for all I tell yo'—No! 'Tis no use to argey-bargey. 'Tis no use to beg nor threaten—theer'll ne'er be no change in me! Bin yo' goin' or bain't yo'? . . . If yo'd wanted to make me think o' yo', yo'd ha' gone yer ways for good an' all, an' niver set foot i' this place agen. M'appen then I'd ha' said to myseln: 'Theer wur one man as loved me true!' But yo' be as bad as all th' rest. . . . Out o' my sight wi' yo'!"

"I'll go when ye ha' heerd me," rumbled Mackilliveray stubbornly, though he had winced when Malvina's hand

had pointed to the door. "I takes no onfair 'vantage, seein' who be settin' by to hear me." His blunt head wagged towards Braby, lounging smoking in the Windsor chair. "As for the differ betwixt Good an' Bad, I bain't scholar enough to pint it. They be that tangled as Burn my eyes if I can tell tother from which! Like th' charcoal an' salpeter, they mixes to make th' Blastin' Gunpowder—as you can eat fur Salt to your wittles or blow yer head off wi' a pinch."

"Good that!" said Braby, tapping his nail on the chair-arm to signify approval. But Mackilliveray went doggedly on in his heavy rumbling bass.

"I be a bachelder an' you be wed. There's th' Bad i' th' business. If I wer' wedded an' you a maid, theer 'ud be Bad agin. Fur sin' fust I clapped my eyes on ye—whether 'tis wakin' or sleepin', I fares to see ye an' hear ye, an' cannawt git no rest! 'Tis like as if a three-inch chain wer' linked an' rivited about me; I cannawt git me free o' it—an' I wouldn' if I cud! An' the want o' you is like the want fur Air, an' Bread, an' Water. A man may live wi'out other things. But he dies wi'out they three."

She would have scourged him with fresh upbraidings here, but his doggedness overbore her. She kept her eyes on him sternly as his heavy voice pursued.

"I cannawt live fur wantin' ye, married as ye be," said Mackilliveray. "Married to th' misbegotten tyke as sets grinnin' an' smokin' in yon cheer. As' 'ud sooner tumble a strumpet in the back yard o' a beer house, than lie i' th' bonny arms o' ye——"

"I'll hear no more!" she said. "Yo', Braby, put this man to th' door if yo' wanna ha' me do it!"

But Braby crossed his legs as though unmoved by this unexpected home-thrust.

"Suppose we cut the cackle, my friend, and come to the business-proposals?" he suggested, with a mocking smile, and a sidelong glitter of his black eyes.

"Ay, I'm comin' to th' business part o' it now," returned Mackilliveray, heavily.

"I wanna hear no more fro' yo'!" cried Malvina, once again.

“Missus, you’ll hear me. Theer’s no Divorce fur poor folks,” said Mackilliveray roughly, “but wut be to hinder a ‘Greement, an’ th’ payin’ of Money Down? Fur I ha’ gotten a bit o’ Brass, come my way through my mother’s sister as kep’ a li’l baker’s shop, an’ wer’ a single soul. Her died nobbut two month agone, an’ the li’l shop be mine now, just as it stands in Wemlock, on Culver Market Side. An’ the li’l house behind—an’ th’ garden too, all full o’ rasps an’ currans—be mine to do my pleasure wi’. Naught’s wantin’ to make me a home! Naught but the one thing—” said the red-haired man, “—as you’ll gi’ me when you comes to me. An’ tells me as you trusts to me. An’ lays your hand in mine!”

There is no eloquence that can move like the eloquence of genuine earnestness. The passion of the man rang true in every word he said. And though the Adversary might have baited his hook with a myriad richer offers, not one could have tempted the simple soul of Malvina so insidiously as this. . . .

The little baker’s shop on Culver Market Side, with new crusty loaves in the window. A tray or two of brown pound-cakes and three-cornered raspberry tarts. A vase of flowers on the counter fresh-gathered from the little back garden. . . . Brass scales and shining crystal jars full of sugar-sticks and bull’s-eyes.

Malvina behind the counter in a new-wincey gown and white apron, serving the customers with bread, or pastry in paper bags. In the little parlour behind the shop—Not Braby, sneering and spiteful, profligate, brutal and faithless—but the man who stood pleading his cause with her in the middle of the floor.

He was unscrupulous enough in his lawless way of wooing, this bull-necked navvy, whose homespun speech had the racy smack of her own. But Mackilliveray’s love, illicit as it was, had depth in it and tenderness. . . . Had he not said to her, many months ago, standing at the door of the woodshed:

“I cannawt see no woman’s face sin’ I ha’ looked on yourn.”

The air of the room vibrated again with his rumbling heavy accents:

"I binna' a man wi' a mouthful o' words, but to what I says I holds. . . . I'll be trew to ye, my gradely lass, as wedded husban' could be. An' when yon blaggard cheats the gallers an' th' Hangman by deein', I'll marry ye. Upon my oath to God in Heaven! Now I ha' said my say!"

He dropped the heavy right hand he had raised, and waited for her answer. She breathed deeply and the fire of her eyes died out and left them troubled and dim.

She was thinking. . . . She slowly lifted a hand, and moved it before her forehead as though she were thrusting away a veil whose folds had baffled her eyes. She had loved the man who sat smoking in the chair, with steady, faithful devotion. She had taken him back to her heart after years, as though they had been parted a day. She had borne his vicious waywardness, his abuse and occasional ill-usage, with a forbearing patience that was more a mother's than a wife's.

But she was weary to the soul, and the gulf that had lately opened between herself and Stephen had made life harder to bear. So much harder that when the daybrow lifted in the east and showed the eye of morning, she wished in her heart that it was night, and at night-fall longed for the day.

She looked about the single room shorn of so many comforts, for Braby had sold time after time more furniture for drink. The hunting-crop hung over the chest-of-drawers, on which stood a saucer of violets. She started at the sight of this, and the two men watching saw her start, and the duller man grasped the reason. He sensed the obstacle in the path of his desire, and moved to clear the way.

"M'appen ye be thinkin', about th' Boy," he said in his slow thick accents. "You be mortal set on th' young narbor, Missus. Well, bring him if he'll coom wi' ye! I got news along o' my pot at the tap, as May ha' gin 'im warnin'. Fur pallin' oop wi' some poachin' blokes, I reckon I heerd 'em tell." He added as Malvina winced and paled and put her hand to her bosom, "I shannot grudge him bed an'

board, an' he's gittin' a broadly chap. We'se fare to find him a job wi' th' gang, an' ye'll see he'll fend fur a livin'. Wut do ye say?"

Braby interposed.

"She considers it a liberal proposal. Come, 'Vina. Hang delicacy and reserve! We're waiting for 'Yes' or 'No.'"

She said, not like a yielding woman at all, looking from Mackilliveray to Braby:

"Theer's a man as stands in my husband's home bids me break my marriage oath. . . . Theer's another man, my husband,—as hearkens him, an' hearkens wi'out shame or anger. But theer be Another One as said, 'Thou shan-not commit Adultery.' Yo've got my answer in they words. Be 'em plain enough fur yo'?"

Mackilliveray made the rumbling noise in his throat that might have been laughter or blasphemy. Braby pitched the chewed stump of his cigar away and screamed an oath at her:

"By —— 'Vina! there's no sense in you!"

"Hear rayson, woman!" said Mackilliveray.

"I'll listen to nought," said Malvina, as the dancing fire flung their shadowy shapes on the whitewashed wall and ceiling, and the redness of the sunset was spilled like blood upon the whiteness of the coarse clean tablecloth, and lay in a pool at Braby's feet as he lounged, smiling, by the hearth-side. "Not another word will I hear fro' yo'! Yo' ha' paid your brass to the man in yon chair fur th' right to tempt his wedded wife to take the way o' wickedness, an' broadly man as yo' be,—yo'r nowt but a puppet in his cunnin' hands. For well he knowed yo'd niver win yo'r will wi' me, Bob Mackilliveray!"

"He telled me ye'd make a mimming mouth," said Mackilliveray loudly and angrily, opening and shutting the thick fingers of the hands that dangled at his sides. "An' seven pound I paid to speak, an' thretty I'd ha' paid if ye'd come wi' me. . . . An' Burn my eyes an' Blast me! but I'll make ye willin', one day!"

It seemed to the shuddering boy at the door, that he would have crossed the floor to her. But her glance had

shifted, quick as light, to the bread-knife on the platter with the loaf. Next instant it gleamed in her lifted hand; and Stephen, without clearly understanding the nature of the outrage offered her, knew that if Mackilliveray had touched her then, she would have killed him with that knife.

"Let be!" screamed Braby with whitened lips. "Hold off, if you're a wise man! She'll let daylight through that thick hide o' yours, as sure as hell is hell!"

"You'll niver scrat a grey-haired head, ye cankered hound!" said Mackilliveray, with the sweat running down his heavy cheeks, and the back of his thick red neck. "Ye said she wer' willin', ye lousy rogue!"

"Well, she's changed her mind," shrugged Braby. "Her leaky kennel and her mouldy straw and her bare bone please her best. So good-night to you! Why, here's the boy."

"You're wanted outside," said Stephen, as Mackilliveray swung round, throwing on his cap, and showing a scowling face.

"He browt me here. He did, by jings!" he grumbled. "'Twere him as browt me!" And thrusting Stephen roughly aside, lumbered heavily out of the house. Walking in a high-shouldered awkward way, and swinging his arms from the shoulders, like a man spoiling for a fight, and cursing as he went. . . .

"He took me there. I'll swear to that, jigger me if he didn't!" Stephen heard him say to Faggis outside the garden gate, "He said as th' woman wer' willin'. How did I know th' differ? Sarve him right if I'd outed him, blarst his corn-founded soul!"

8

"Listen, 'Vina!" As the thick dupe blustered himself away, vowing vengeance on the knave who had betrayed him, Braby swaggered out of the chair, and crossed the room to his wife's side. "I went too far, I'll admit it, but I meant no evil by you. Didn't you say yourself just now that I knew you'd never take the chance. The man's a dunderheaded fool! A half-witted booby with a crack on you. And I made him pay—oh! he told you the truth—

for a chance to pay court to my wife. A brutal thing! I'll go farther, and say it was abominable! You hear me admit it, frankly, and say that there's no excuse. But this, of course, that I'm cursedly poor and shabby and out-at-elbows. . . . Come now, my girl! Don't stare at me like a woman made of stone."

She might have been a statue, for all heed she gave to his vapourings. She looked at him, and he felt that she looked—as though she had never seen him before. Until he laid a hand upon her arm, and then such a shudder went through her that, dulled and perverted as his apprehensions were, he started back in dismay.

"Yo'll take off yo'r hand if yo' be wise," she said, looking at him fixedly, and the terrible contempt of her great grey eyes seared even his calloused soul. "For nobbut I'll cook yo'r meat fur yo', an' clean an' red yo'r dwellin', I wunnot eat o' yo'r bread, an' I be a stranger to yo'r bed fur ivermore."

She went on, as he blackened and scowled under her look and thrust the hand that had touched her into his pocket and insolently jingled some coins that were there:

"There's two sorrows as a wife may bear, an' one as she canna' put up wi'. There's the White Sorrow, when she loses her babes,—an' the Grey Sorrow, when she loses her man. The Black Sorrow comes when Shame an' disgrace be brought on th' woman by her husband. Ay! rattle th' ill-gotten brass i' yo'r pouch! It should burn yo' to th' bone."

"You're unreasonable, 'Vina, like the rest of your sex, but, like other women, you're fond of proverbs. Here's one," said Braby with a snigger and a shrug: "'Needs must when the Devil drives!' After all, I've done no worse than a dandy West End Clubman, whose rich friend loses money to him at cards for the right to make love to his wife. What are you spying and listening for, you shock-headed young mongrel?"

"Mr. Faggis wants a word wi' you outside," stammered Stephen, who was trembling and white.

"You'll use 'sir' to me when you address me," said Braby bullyingly.

“Sir,” said Stephen, feeling in his breast for something he had hidden there.

“Again and louder!” ordered Braby, moving a little nearer, with the vicious look that usually heralded a box on the ear.

“Sir,” said Stephen loudly.

“Don’t shout, damn you!” snarled Braby. “So he won’t come in,” he began again, turning his wrath on Faggis, “but bids me to his presence, eh? All right, my nobleman!” He pulled out a fresh cigar, and said, as he bit off the end and struck a match and lighted it, and blew a coarse, unfragrant cloud about the low-pitched room: “I’ll go and listen to what he has to say, and then have the pleasure of kicking him. Do you hear, you lout? Why, curse me! What’s that paper in your hand?”

He whipped the folded document from the boy with a fierce, rapacious eagerness. He was bluish-white instead of sallow now, and his eyes seemed bolting from his head. He glanced at the neat clerky script of the endorsement at the top of the parchment, turned the sheets—looked at the first page and the last—and wrenched at the collar about his neck as though it were choking him. No sooner spoken, the irrevocable words,—no sooner done, the unpardonable thing,—then adverse Circumstances changed, and Fortune, so coldly, persistently aloof, came fawning—like a spaniel. And yet men ventured to deny that there was a devil . . . Fools!

“When? . . . What? How did you——”

His staring eyes had found the white-faced Stephen. His shaking hand had clutched Stephen by the arm. He dragged him towards the hearth-place, and dropped into the chair, and made signs for some explanation. Avoiding his mother’s frozen face, Stephen delivered his tale:

“I went with Faggis to Brabycott, wantin’ to look at th’ House there. He bought some old beds and a big armchair, an’ a leather-top table fur writin’ on, wi’ drawers in it an’ two legs in front, an’ all carved—an’ wi’ a queerish name.”

“An escritoire. Speak quicker, boy!”

“Summat like that. An’ that paper dropped out of a drawer that had got broken, and had two bottoms to it,

like, an' Faggis he grabs hold. An' he looks inside, and says it's the Will he an' Mrs. Faggis signed to, and tells me to git back in the barrer and sit fast and hold on to it tight. An' he whips the pony, and cuts away from Braby-cott House like winking. An' Grundall he comes after us in the gig wi' the mare all foamin' fury. And Grundall an' Faggis has a tug for the Will, an' he cuts him wi' the whip a good 'un—an' then he tumbles out o' the gig, an' the mare she goes fur him. Gits him by the neck an' worries him, she does!"

"Good brute! And has she killed him?" asked Braby, with sweat pouring over his face, and his teeth chattering in his head.

"I dunno. But he's pretty bad."

"Where's Faggis?"

"He's outside, waitin'."

"Call him in. What's that? . . ."

'That' was a knock at the partly-open door.

9

"Is Mr. Wilfrid Braby here?" asked a thin, harsh voice, and a woman, short and spare, and wrapped in a shawl, stepped unasked into the living-room.

"Who the hell are you?" cried Braby, starting from his seat in anger. "Not you, Sophy Petcher, after all these years!" he went on, shaking and staring, as she pushed back the shawl from a thin, white face, and turned the face upon him. "Hang it all, woman! What a wreck you are. What have you done to yourself? You look like a sandy-white cat that has been near starved to death."

"My face has altered like your own," said the woman, "and not for the better. But you can say whether in those old days it was the face of an enemy, or a friend?"

"Friends cropping up already! . . . Phew!" cried Braby, with a whistle. "We shall be rich in them by and by. But there's truth in what you say! What have you come about? . . . Be quick! We have no time for wasting."

"I've come to bring you a message from Mr. Gregson

Grundall," said Sophy, hitching up the shawl so as to recover her head. "My master, as he's been for the last sixteen years or thereabouts. And I have had a worse master, I'll say as much for him!"

"And he has had worse servants," sneered Braby, "you'll likely say for yourself. How goes it with our Gregson, eh?"

"Better than might be thought," returned Petcher, keeping her pale, dilated eyes on the mocking face of Braby, as she held the folds of the shawl under her chin with a thin, white, claw-like hand. "He's cruel shook, but not dangerous hurt, unless the bite on his shoulder festers."

"And there's nothing so poisonous as the bite of a horse," said Braby, with exultant relish. "Let's hope it won't turn gangrenous, for the sake of the poor gentleman and his friends. I fancy I can see 'em, rallying at his graveside. Or waiting down below—you know!—till Gregson comes along. A meeting that! Eh, woman?"

"Don't!" said Sophy Petcher, shuddering, or making a twitching movement of her shoulders under the shawl.

"I don't!" returned Braby grimly. "Now then, about this message?"

"And sharp's the word," said Faggis, appearing in the doorway at this juncture with his damaged visage muffled in a gay silk handkerchief, "for it'll be as much as my prad can do to git to London 'fore midnight. Begging your pardon, Mrs. Braby, ma'am——" He touched his cap to Malvina. "But if your good gentleman wants a lift, I'm ready to take him free."

"Another friend!" said Braby, with his intolerable snigger. "Come, Sophy, what does Gregson say? We are on thorns to hear."

"He begs you," said Petcher, pushing back the shawl with a hand that seemed transparent, and showing her meagre, triangular face between thin loops of ginger-grey hair, "not to show the Will you found to-day to Tusser, Worrill and Stickey, or any other lawyers, until you've seen and spoke with him. For his sake and your own!"

"Not for his sake, and his own sake? Are you quite sure, old Sophy?"

"I am sure that if you'll only wait until Mr. Grundall can speak with you—and the doctor says that to-morrow he may risk this without overmuch harm,—it will be for your good in the long-run. Leave the Will in hands that you can trust if you've your doubts of Grundall. Will you go to see him, or will you not? I'm to take back your word."

"I'll answer you," taunted Braby, "when you have given me an answer. What nest have you to feather out of this? Your own, or whose, if not yours?"

"Not his," said the woman, "that I'll swear!" Her pale eyes glittered green like a cat's in the sunset-tinted twilight, and the dancing blaze of the fire on the hearth made her shadow gambol on the wall. "Nor my own. Nor yours, though, as you have owned, I never was your enemy. Now will you come and see Grundall, at The Chestnuts over to Wheatstone, at ten to-morrow morning? Answer me,—'Yes' or 'No'!"

"What do you think, Faggis?" asked Braby, turning to the hawker, as Petcher shut her mouth with a snap and extinguished herself in her shawl. "Shall I risk my head in Beelzebub's jaws, or bid him get back to hellfire?"

"I should resk seein' him, if I was you—taking the Will along. And a pal to keep eye on it an' you. Some cove as is knowed in this neighbourhood—and held to be straight-for'ard, an' honest in 'is ways."

"Yourself, I suppose you mean, my man?" said Braby, with intolerable suspicion glittering in his narrowed eyes, and twisting the corners of his mouth.

"Not by 'arf, Mister! For I ain't no pal o' yours, as I knows!" returned the hawker. "Why not leave the Will at 'ome with your wife an' go to see him on your lone? Sick men can't do much 'arm!"

"I will leave the Will with my wife," grinned Braby, keeping his glance away from her, "but that she has prayed on her knees for years I might never get the cash!" He thrust the parchment into a pocket made in the lining of his waistcoat, and slapped his chest with a knowing wink, as he buttoned the waistcoat up. "Rumbold shall lock this up to-night in some safe hiding-hole or other, and to-morrow I'll take him to Wheatstone in the character of Old

Dog Tray. With such a mastiff at his heels a man can face his enemy. Give me a lift to his place on the Green instead of taking me to London. You can drop me near the stepping-stones that cross the Tolley Brook. The water barely wets the stones," cried Braby, laughing wildly, "or I wouldn't cross 'em for a pocketful of sovereigns to-night! For fear the Brook might rise over my head and swallow me up with my Fortune. What did you say, Sophy? No whispering with my friends!"

"I was asking this decent man," said Petcher, who had spoken in an undertone to Faggis, "to warn you to keep from the tap to-night, if you'd have a clear head by day. Because you're the worst enemy you have, be the other who he may be. So good night to you, Mr. Wilfrid, and another good night to your wife."

"Good night to yo'," said Malvina, moving her lips stiffly.

"We have never met before," said Petcher, "nor may we meet again. I have no grudge laid up against you, nor you against me, I fancy. Good night to you, boy!" Her sharp glance went to Stephen, hanging in the background. "Going by your looks, you're your mother's son. Maybe 'tis as well for you."

"Don't waste your breath on the boy," said Braby, shrugging his thin shoulders. "A straight-made, clean-skinned young clodpoll enough, as far as he goes, I'll grant. But nothing to carry one's family name to a Public School and Oxford, and make swell friends, and hold his own among gentlemen, as a gentleman should. It's a thorn in my flesh, and a rankling one. Don't let us talk of it!"

"Now, as Heaven's my judge," returned Petcher, throwing back her shawl to stare at him, "I have heard those words in that very tone, spoken by your father of you. You're a chip of th' old block, that you are—though you'd like best to deny it! There's another one as like to you—though not bearing the name of Braby,—as one rain-drop's like another, or two peas out o' one pod. Maybe you'll meet *her* to-morrow!" She went out with a sour nod to him.

"Been eatin' lemons with a steel fork, she 'as," said Faggis, looking after her.

"She's a cankered soul," said Braby, arranging his slovenly garments. "Why on earth have you swaddled up your head like an old Gipsy woman?"

"For toothache, Mister," returned Faggis, "to which I 'ave bin subject from a kid."

"Oh! . . . I suppose you're uncommonly well aware, you have rendered me a service," said Braby, arranging his tawdry cravat in front of the looking-glass. "Well! you'll be rewarded handsomely. I suppose you have no doubts of it? Meanwhile, what do you say to a drop? There's a bottle on the cupboard shelf."

"Not none for me, nor none for you if you'll take advice," returned the hawker. "The closer you 'ugs the tea-kettle just now, the better, I should say. Wot about this Lift? Will you 'ave it or not?"

"A word to my wife and I'm with you," said Braby, reaching down his hat from a peg and signing to Stephen for his stick. "Take the boy outside. . . . A minute's enough."

"Make it a dozen, Governor, I shall want a minute or so myself," said Faggis, glancing at Malvina with concern imprinted on the visible part of his honest brick-red face, "to put some bits o' Furniture off my Barrer into your woodshed. Which I bought this mornin' at Brabycott, but 'ave objections to carryin' away."

"I dunnot unnerstand yo'," protested Malvina faintly. "Hanna yo' bought th' sticks as yo' say, an' paid yo'r brass fur 'em?"

"Correct. I bought the harticles," admitted Mr. Faggis, "but the Party as sold the goods to me made the mistake o' fergettin' as they belonged to another Party. An' the Party as wot they belongs to being your hown Governor, p'raps you won't raise no objection to my leavin' of 'em 'ere? No Risk wotever bein' attached to the transaction," continued Mr. Faggis, "as the Fire Assurance Com'ny's Agent said when he took the seven-an'-six. An' give the Policy to the hold lady who 'ad 'er cookin' done

at the baker's, and never 'lowed no fires nor lights in the 'ouse for fear of Accidents. As for some Chaney I bought from 'ere along o' some other Antigreeks, I sold it to a long-haired gent as took it away in a keb. But the cupboard an' the Clock with the Moon an' the Ship, I'll bring back inside of a fortnit, askin' you kindly to excoose delay, me being engaged elsewheres."

Perhaps some warmth of sympathy hidden under his Cockney shrewdness thawed the numbed heart of the woman, for her frozen eyes grew soft. She said in a voice more like her own:

"Put th' things in the woodshed if yo' will, theer be plenty room to spare fur 'em. But fur th' things yo' took from here, I canna' pay yo' back. No penny o' th' money touched my han's, so I am clear o' wrong to yo'."

"There's no question of that, Missus!"

She went on as though she had not heard:

"Th' clock wi' the moon and the sailin' ship, an' th' cupboard, an' they bits o' crockery—wer' more worth to me than the grandest goods as iver came new fro' th' shops. But they're nowt to me, but lumber, now! Like the huzbush growin' by this door, as were nobbut a Queen's nose-gay; no rose that ever blowed, I thowt, could ha' a sweeter smell. But th' day ha' gone fur me to think or feel in any such-like fash'n. Good night t' yo', master, and thank yo' fur yo'r kindness to th' boy."

"Been kind to the boy, has he?" commented Braby sourly, as the door closed behind the hawker and Stephen at the hawker's heels. "A downy bird. Perhaps he guessed that kindness was a good investment? Perhaps all these years he has had an idea where the Will was hid away. Though I've known that old carved escritoire of my father's since my babyhood, and never dreamed of false bottoms to any of the drawers. Not that it matters now!"

Following his strange wont of thinking aloud, he had asked himself these questions. But Malvina's voice now answered him with a strange flat tonelessness:

"Theer's nowt that matters now, no more."

"We've seen the landfall of Hope rise up out of an ocean of misery," Braby returned, "but Everything matters in-

fernally now!" He could look at her and speak to her again, in his old contemptuous manner, softened in the present instance by a touch of patronage. "He sends to me! He'll come to terms, Greg Grundall the Usurper!—He'll never let the Chancery Case re-open if he's wise. Pitch the land after the money!—the helve after the hatchet!" He began to pace up and down the room, a favourite habit with him. "He'll temporize and I'll dictate. By G——! I can hear myself talking: 'Brabycott, a sum down, and two thousand a year, for the *present*, understand!' . . ."

His sallow face showed two blazing spots over the haggard cheekbones. His black eyes flared with a crazy light, he tore off his hat and threw it down. He threw down his stick beside the hat, to free his arms for gesturing, and went rhapsodizing on, as he paced the carpetless floor.

"I choose to be reinstated at once. You hear me, sir?—you hear me? Fully and completely, in the eyes of one and all. The House got ready—servants engaged. A cordial, respectful reception of the bearer of the honoured name—restored to his station and rank. . . ." He wheeled and went to the cupboard-shelf where he kept his bottle of spirits, and poured out a three-finger dram, and tossed it down his throat. "Ha, ha! That strings the nerves," he said. "But still, I mean to be careful. Not too many sips between the cup and the lips. By Heaven! I'm making verse."

He put away the bottle and the glass, and came back and sat on the table. Malvina had moved when he had, and seated herself in a chair. There was a basket near her on a shelf with some socks she had been darning. Absently she took up one of these, and spread it on her hand.

"Throw that away!" said Braby, suddenly, and snatched the patched and ill-shaped footwear and threw it on the fire, chuckling at her face of dismay. "You're a lady now. You take your place in the County with the best of them! Beauty like yours carries far, though its owner is ignorant as a stone. As for the boy, if a clodpoll as I've said—he's a handsome, strong young animal. 'Gad! take the three of us as we are, we're worth looking at, after all!"

Warm rain dropping on the stone to which he had just now likened her, would have done no more to melt it than these surly compliments of his.

She had uttered a faint cry when he had snatched the sock and thrown it on the glowing embers, where it lay, charring and giving out a smell of burning wool. Now her eyes ignored it, and her face showed nothing of the housewifely impulse urging her,—as it blackened and shrivelled with a crepitating sound—to snatch it from the fire. “Come, 'Vina!” The fumes had made Braby cough. He took out his cheap smart handkerchief and wiped some moisture from his eyes. “Forgive before I go. I am ashamed of what I've done. I am degraded in my own eyes no less than in yours—I swear it! Haven't you a word of pardon for a genuine penitent?”

No answer came. He glanced at her, and wondered, ‘Is she thawing?’ and felt a sort of fear of her because she was so still. But she would forgive. . . . She had always forgiven. He went on now more smoothly:

“I never believed—never thought. . . . We won't go into that again. . . . But I realize the baseness,—I wallow in compunction. Fortune's kickball—a branded Cain—a kind of family scapegoat with every hand against me I've been since I was four years old. Who knows it better than yourself?”

He paused. A strange voice came from the stiff lips of the icy mask before him:

“‘Cain,’ do yo' call yo'rself. . . . It wer' Cain as hated of his brother. . . . Yo' ha' hated yo'r father an' yo'r sister, an' now yo' hates yo'r son. ‘Fortune's kickball.’ . . . If yo' ha' bin that, I ha' bin yourn, I reckon!”

His jaw dropped. Astounding that she should speak in this wise. If a stone, such as he had called her, had found human speech to upbraid him, he could hardly have been more startled. He stared at her. She went on:

“The Good Book tells us to forgive unto seventy times an' seven. I've overed that, yo' knows full well, in my dealin's wi' th' man yo' be. We ha' bin poor. Bitter poor, but we'd ha' wanted nothin' if yo'd but ha' done some honest work, an' kept away from Drink.”

"I own it! I spent your money. I have been a drunkard and a waster!" He struck his forehead and tossed up his hands as though throwing ashes on his head. "Mad fool! To risk a love like yours. But think it madness, 'Vina! Be charitable—you are that, Heaven knows!—and make the best of me. Have I no redeeming virtues? . . . My father's money has been wasted, but the estate has been paying solidly ever since the case began. When Grundall spits up his profits—be sure that I shall squeeze him!—we should find ourselves—take my word!—well-to-do, if not rich. . . . Is there nothing noble,—nothing fine in my eagerness to share with you? With you, who have halved my poverty. Think! Think, my girl, and say!"

"I ha' thowt . . ."

She rose up from her broken chair, once damaged by his tipsy violence. He had never known her handsomer or realized her to be so tall.

"I ha' thowt while I ha' setten here. . . . Theer's much as I ha' borne from yo'. Yo're no sweet nosegay, Braby, man, to lie in a cleanly breast. But for the oath I swore to God to be a faithful wife to yo', dunnot yo' think as long before this I'd ha' married my foot to th' road! Left yo', wi' th' boy yo' hates fur no reason but his love fur his mother, as th' Lord put into his bonny li'l heart to save her fro' breakin' her own."

"What's this? . . . 'Vina! do I hear my wife? . . ."

Consternation was written on his visage. The image he had reared of himself had rocked and crumbled down. In his own eyes he had ever been the King and she the beggar's daughter, lifted by condescending love to share Cophetua's throne. She went on:

"I ha' forgi'en yo' over an' again, an' little thanks ha' got fur it. An' as theer be One sin th' Lord winnot owerlook, I reckons as theer be another one a wife canna' pardon her husband. But—swear off drink for good an' all, an' put yon Will in the fire, an' I'll forgive yo'r wrong to me, though I canna' promise to forget. Choose now, Braby. 'Tis yo'r last chance!"

He muttered something incoherent.

"Choose quick," she said, and her deep, sweet voice filled

the twilit, firelit room. Her great grey eyes were starry, her worn garments took on richness from the splendour of the body that their threadbare fabric clothed. And the scales fell from the dullard's eyes, and he realized his blindness.

Was this the simple creature who had borne abuse and blows? This the meek partner of his bed, the neglected drudge of his household? This goddess cloaked with red-gold hair, whose high head neared the joists above. . . . As he hugged the parchment buttoned in his breast, he was stung with perverse desire.

"I'll have you and the money too, my wife!" He nodded at her gaily. There was something of his old lost self in the bold, gay, laughing look. "I'll teach you to forgive the past. I'll drink no more, by Heaven! But if you leave me, as you hint you'll do, and shame me before my equals—I'll burn the ship to the waterline. That's in the Braby blood!"

Then he went out. Like a woman in a dream, she listened to the sounds of his departure, a word or two exchanged with Faggis, and the slamming of the garden-gate. There was a puff of dew-wet fragrance from the lilac overhanging the gateway. Then wheels jolted on the rutted way that led out of the wheatacres; and Stephen rushed in, slamming the door, and charged at his Masterpiece.

"Eh, Stevey, Steve! . . ."

Perhaps his rough, impetuous hug thawed the Arctic snows of her bosom. For she cried out, and swayed like a stately beech sawn through—and fell upon her knees. And wept and wept, with her long arms flung across her homely supper-table, and her face hidden between her arms, such tears as are not good to shed.

She stanchd the rush of those terrible tears, presently, for the sake of Stephen, who clung to her and begged her, through his own tears, not to cry. . . . "My own, own lad! My Stevey dear!" she said as they clasped each other, and Stephen was happy, for the gulf was bridged that had parted them for so long.

As she said this for the twentieth time, with her cheek upon his forehead, comforted at this last and worst, by

the feel of his arms about her waist, the deepening darkness warned her of the neglect of a household duty. An act repeated till its use had lost significance.

This was the lighting of her little lamp and the setting of it on the window-sill. She performed these acts mechanically, and raised her hand to the blind. As she touched the cord to lower it, a strange dizziness made the well-known room gyrate and swim about her, and a stranger inward shock and thrill confirmed her secret fears.

She was to bear another child to Braby, the vile and faithless. To carry the shrined secret of an unborn soul while she toiled for herself and her boy. Well! she would have to welcome the babe, poor helpless stray from Beyond There. . . . And being a woman of heroic mould, she strung herself to the task.

IO

The lamp had burned for three nights more before there came a sign from Braby, with the stooping of Rumbold's high, grizzled head under the lintel of the cottage door. The wheelwright with the carved mahogany face was dressed as though it were Sunday.

"I come wi' a message, Mrs. Braby, ma'am," he said as she offered him a chair.

It seemed that for once a castle in the air had proved to have solid foundations. Gregson Grundall had chosen to disgorge rather than go back into Court. Eighteen hundred a year and the House were at the disposal of Braby, so long as the Will remained unproved. . . . Presently he would receive more. . . . Meanwhile, a substantial sum of money had been placed by Grundall to his credit in the High Marnet branch of the Hertfordshire and Middlesex Bank. The Will remained in Rumbold's care, Rumbold being Secretary of the Tolleymead Workmen's Benefit Club, and owner of an ancient seven-locked safe in which the Club funds were stored.

Malvina waited for the rest.

More followed, with the production of a tidy roll of notes and some gold from the shabby leather pouch that

lived in Rumbold's trousers' pocket. He laid the money on the table and delivered his message therewith.

Mr. Braby sent his devoted love to his wife and their son Stephen, and begged them to purchase everything required, and join him at Brabycott House. He urged them not to spare expense to present a creditable appearance. . . .

"So as he wunnat be ashamed o' us," said Malvina in her calm, grave voice. "Ay. That would be a backset for th' man, to be disgraced at th' beginnin'. Take back yon money i' yo'r hand, an' tel' him he'll be spared."

Rumbold, seeing her immovable, swept the money up and dropped it, with as much respect for the valuable stuff as though it had been a pinch of screws, back into his old-world leather pouch, and thrust the pouch back into his pocket and got up on his long corduroyed legs to take his old-fashioned leave.

"This means, ma'am, that you're not in the mind to share your husband's fortune?"

"Nobbut it isna' kind o' him to offer it," she said. "Yo'll thank him for his wife an' boy. But Steve an' me we stops here."

"Braby should make an allowance for your keep."

"Nay, that's again my notion. I'll pay th' rent as 'fore-times," said Malvina in decided tones. "Me and Steve'll live here an' addle our bread as we've bin allays used to. Braby'll not need to worrit—if he do. . . . I shunna' think he would! Good day to yo', Master, wi' my thanks fur being so true a friend to him."

"He's got a truer in yourself," said Rumbold. "An' that he knows. Deep down in the bottom of his heart he knows it, Mrs. Braby."

"Has he a heart?" she could have asked. But his faithful champion went on:

"He have queer ways of expressing of hisself, have Mr. Wilfrid always. But he's none so mindset or so warped as he don't valley his wife."

"None will ever want for your good word," she said, with her rare sweet smile for him.

"Nay, I think you're a mindset body yourself," said the

wheelwright, rubbing his chin. "Don't carry away the notion as I think you're actin' wise-like."

"I'll fare to hope," she returned to him, "as yo'll niver think no worse. Fur my reasons, Braby knows 'em. Be that all yo' was to say to me?" she asked, as Rumbold coughed behind his hand and shuffled his big feet on the floor.

"There were a tail-like to the message, ma'am."

Perspiration stood on his upper lip and his seamed mahogany visage was furrowed into deeper lines by sheer bewilderment.

"Would it," she said to help him out, "be onnything about Forgiveness?"

"Ay, yea!" the wheelwright acquiesced, "that would have been the word. Mr. Braby he laid on me to say as he bore ye no grudge for anything; and ye might count as he truly forgave everything there were to forgive."

"Now that wer' Christian of th' man!" she said in her mellow accents, with a spark of humour in her great grey eyes and the dimple showing in her cheek. "Have he forgiven yo' as well for all th' harm yo' done him?"

"Now dang my eyes for a dratted old fool!" cried the wheelwright, "for telling ye that. By-rights you'd not shake hands with me when I bid ye good day, Mrs. Braby?"

For answer she held out to him her large, work-hardened, but still beautiful hand.

"Here's a message for Braby when yo' sees him next." She pointed to the frontward window. "Tell him as th' light wer' burnin' theer th' night he went away. An' iver a night while here I be, my han' will set it yonder, nobbut it niver keeps a man from stumblin' in th' dark. But till my dyin' day he'll see no change in me," said Malvina. "Fur that money be poison in my eyes, an' I will touch it none!"

Furrows deepened in Rumbold's forehead. His blue-shaven jaws set grimly and the huge brown hand that held her own closed on it with a crunching grip. But the water stood in his eyes, not hers, and when he made his old-world bow, he turned away his face. Seeing in him

a faithful soul, torn between two friendships and two loyalties, be sure she liked him none the worse when he carried his tall body away. His belief in Braby, not for the first time, came to her assistance. Not all evil, or could this good man have championed him so.

Book the Fourth:

HOW TREACHERY TURNED THE TABLES AND LOVE
WENT OUT AT THE DOOR, AND STEPHEN SHOULDERED
HIS BURDEN AND THE PIPERS PIPED NO MORE

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THE TABLES AND LOVE WENT OUT AT
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MORE

I

FIVE months after the finding of the lost Will in the escritoire from the library at Brabycott, hidden away between the double bottoms of the drawer that tumbled out, Stephen's mother had altered strangely in countenance as in figure. Many nights the boy had wakened to hear her pacing the floor.

Physical suffering in one so strong, so superbly healthful and vigorous, bewilders the patient who suffers and daunts those others who look on. What Malvina could not hide, Stephen presently noticed. What she did not tell he guessed at, helped by the knowledge of thirteen years.

There came a night of horror on the heels of a day of anguish.

"Let me go fur th' doctor, mother," he had sobbed. "You be mortal bad, fur sure."

"'Twill be ten shillin', or twelve, maybe, out o' the li'l wee box in the bedstead," said Malvina, who kept their savings stowed away in this queer little hiding-hole, "an' they shillin's will be wanted fur other needs, I reckon." She set her lips, and her face was wrung and twisted by a spasm of pain.

"Bid me fetch Mrs. Pover to ye then!" begged Stephen.

But Malvina was adamant.

"Yo' shanna' trouble her. Isn' Pover nigh death's door wi' the chill upon his chest? Nay, I'll do as I ha' done before. Remember what I've telled yo'. 'Tis a fine night

an' 'twill hurt yo' none to spend it under the stars. Listen for the Church clock strikin' One, then come back an' knock at th' window." She pointed to the window in the southward wall, near which stood the four-post bed. . . . "If I raps back wi' this here stick as I shall keep along wi' me, yo' can come in. . . . If I gives no sign—go to Pover's. That be all!"

And she had thrust his supper into his hand, and driven him from the threshold, and shut the door and steeled herself in loneliness to face her woman's hour.

He who loved her could do nothing at all but what she had forbidden. He disobeyed her in so far that he hung about in the near vicinity of their home. Until with the wearing of the time came the flood-tide of such anguish as forces its way, in words or sounds, through the barriers of the Will. And the boy beat wildly on the door and heard her sternly answer:

"Yo' shanna' come! Be off wi' yo'!" and cry again on God.

And then, with his fingers in his ears to shut out that terrible moaning, he was running through the wheatacres with the night wind in his face and in his hair. Sobbing as he ran and crying, like some young, lost, wandering spirit, sometimes upon his mother and at other times on God. . . .

He was over some wire and amongst unfriendly trees against the boles of which he bruised himself, and brambles that tripped his stumbling feet and tore his hands and clothes; and then he had struggled through a quickset hedge at cost of more rents and scratches, and was on a broad white highway that he knew as the Great North Road.

A lane debouched on the opposite side of the smooth, hard-beaten highway, and at its end were wide, white gates, and lamps that winked red and green. The lamps belonged to Sowgate, the last station before East Marnet. And the white gates were shutting all by themselves in a weird, uncanny way. And then—with an ear-splitting shriek and a roar that shook Stephen's heart in his body,

an Express bound south for the Terminus rushed by, belching fire and steam. . . .

“Mother!—mother! Oh, where be God?”

He broke out again, crying and running towards where the shining metals of the iron road reflected the winking lamps. . . . All his world lay ruined round him,—there was no hope left for Stephen, with that voice clamouring in his ears that he did not know for his own. . . .

Night and his agony of fear had driven the boy demented. He screamed like a rabbit harried by a fox as he scoured along the lane. He could never go back to the cottage, he knew, because his mother lay dead there. But the white gates were opening again, for a cart to cross the line. . . .

“Be that th’ last up-train to-night?” the carter called to another man who leaned from the window of a signal-box, with his shirt-sleeved elbows on the sill.

“Yes, and the last Express for th’ North comes along in ten minutes,” said the signalman. . . .

Stephen passed in the shadow of the cart through the gates of the level-crossing, turned to his right and ran along the cinders of the permanent way. Stumbling down upon his knees, he stooped his ear towards the metals, and the loudening hum of the north-bound Express came out of the distance beyond.

His Masterpiece was dead. She had called on God, and He had forgotten to answer. She could never come back, but one could go to her if one lay down and just waited for the Express. He stammered through the simple prayer she had taught him when he was a baby, while the faint thin drone of the metals sang of the coming of the iron-wheeled Death. Of the moral turpitude of the act he planned the boy comprehended nothing, though he knew that people who killed themselves were called by an ugly name.

Suicides. . . .

There was a hiss in the word that was like the rush of an adder through grass or moss, or ground ivy stirred by recklessly-treading feet. There was another curious-sounding word the Coroner tacked on to a suicide—at least when

Mr. Wix had read of them from the newspaper at 'The Pure Drop.' . . . 'And the Finding was No Accident. The Deed was Done Deliberate. The Verdict unanimously given by the Jury was *Felo de se.*'

Stephen opened the neck of his coarse blue shirt and settled his head more easily, as out of the blackness to his right came a shrill ear-splitting screech. Two dull red holes punched in the night, changed to blazing ruby headlights. . . . And the metals were not droning now,—they were sounding like a beaten gong. . . .

"*Boom — Boom — Boom — Boom!* Boom — Boom — Boom—BOOM!" . . .

Death was coming. He screamed in hideous fear—tore his ear from the cold, smooth iron—and rolled over the banked side of the down-line into a railway cabbage-plot.

White signals fell, and points clicked over, and a bell clanged in the station, as the north-going Express thundered overhead in a cloud of fiery steam.

Then Stephen got up, shaken and bruised, with no appetite left for suicide—climbed the tarred rail-fence, crossed a fallow field, and got back on the Great North Road.

But when the wheatacres were re-crossed and the cottage loomed dark against the darkness, with a faint gleam showing through the down-drawn blind of the window on the left of the door, his mouth dried up, and his heart knocked hard within his clammy bosom. . . . What was waiting for Stephen there, across the threshold of Home?

* * * * *

The light was burning in the old place on the sill of the frontward window, a dozen inches or so beneath the edge of the lifted blind. All had been dark when he had left. . . . The feeble flame gave him courage to open the gate of the garden, steal up the path, and timidly touch the handle of the door. . . .

Then out of the silence behind the door came a sweet voice softly crooning, to a tune that had the rocking rhythm that marks a cradle-song. A woman singing in Stephen's home, with a voice that was not his mother's. . . . So, they had taken her away. . . . His teeth chattered in his head.

He dropped on the doorstep and laid his ear to a crack in the weather-worn panel. The voice stopped singing, and somebody laughed. . . . His Masterpiece! She said:

“I hannot heerd yon lullaby since Stevey were a litlin’. What’s gone o’ the lad, I wonner? ’Tis time he wer’ comin’ home.”

“Now, now,” said another, older voice, that was not the voice of the singer. “You’re anything but fit to talk. Lie quiet while I take a look. . . . Maybe the child is there outside, with his heart in his mouth, waitin’ . . .”

And the bigger of the Two Good Ladies was the one that opened the door.

Not until later did the boy recognize the habit of the Order of Nazareth in their blue-lined hoods and their long black veils, the starched white guimpes framing their rosy, gentle faces, the pleated garments of dull black serge, touched in the folds with blue. . . .

It seemed that the Sisters were on one of their rounds, collecting alms for their House at Hammersmith, and were to have slept at a friend’s, not far from Tollymead New Station Works. They had sent a message by a labouring man to explain the reason of their non-arrival, and so were free to give themselves, unhindered, to the matter in hand.

* * * * *

“I winna trouble strangers, ma’am,” Malvina had panted in her extremity. How often was Stephen to hear the tale from his mother in days to come. . . .

“Nor need ye, woman,” said the elder nun, whose name was Sister Bridget, “seeing you with a couple of friends to the right and left of ye. ’Twill not be the first babe I’ve helped into the world—nor the last one—take my word for it!”

“The Lord reward yo’!” said Malvina, yielding to those ministering hands.

* * * * *

“’Tis a girl, dear,” said Sister Antony, touching her rosy apple cheek to the drained white face on the pillow.

“Another lamb for the dear Lord’s fold, another lily for Mary’s field.”

“An’ healthy an’ strong,” said the elder nun, through a thin, strange caterwauling, “the way she’ll be walking on her wee little feet and talking before you’d turn round.”

“And all that fluff of black hair she has——” cooed Sister Antony, smoothing it.

“’Twill come off,” said the elder nun sagely. “Hark! Was that wheels in the road?”

They had sent for the doctor, who was away at a case, and the wheels belonged to his dogcart. But the doctor found nothing to do but commend what had already been done.

“And there’ll be to pay him, and I hanna’ th’ brass,” sighed the patient, when Æsculapius had departed. . . .

“Leave that care for to-morrow,” said the younger of the two nuns, “shut your eyes, and just let yourself rest.”

“But th’ money!” Malvina began again. “Th’ money I’m owing th’ doctor! Theer wer’ nowhat o’ reason to worrit th’ man, an’ I cannawt be sparin’ th’ brass. Theer’s little over an’ above the bit put by for th’ landlord. An’ never will I meddle wi’ that!” She shut a resolute mouth.

“The Lord has sent money,” said the younger nun, “for the doctor and what more is wanted. ’Tis odd, when you take all else from Him, you’d stick at what you’d call a bit o’ brass. Talk no more now, for the baby’s sake!”

“And the boy’s,” said the other Sister. “We’ve his supper in the oven now, keeping hot along with our own. . . . For we’re stopping for the night with you, nor will we think to leave you till some decent body can be found to look to your needs and the child’s. Here comes the boy! . . . I hear a step outside there in the garden. Sister Antony, open the door.”

“Why, here he is, Sister, no larger than life,” said the voice that had been singing, and a face that matched the sweetness of the voice smiled down on the bewildered boy. But Stephen’s eyes were not for her. There was his mother in the four-post bed, paler than he had ever seen her, and with great dark circles round her eyes, that gave her an unfamiliar air.

“Eh, my own lad!” she called to him. “Did yo’ think yo’r mother had forgot yo’?”

But Stephen could only sob and say:

“Eh, mother, you’re alive after all!”

“Fiddle!” said the elder of the Sisters, stooping with pinned-back habit to open Malvina’s oven, which exhaled a heavenly smell. She drew forth a well-browned shepherd’s pie as she continued: “Kiss your mother, child, and then sit down to your supper. Sure, ’twas lucky, Sister Antony, we’d meat and potatoes in the bag.”

“And luckier still that the Wheatstone folks told us of the short-cut through the wheatacres,” returned the sweet-voiced, sweet-faced nun, stirring cocoa into milk, “or we’d not have passed the little house, the way we heard a body crying, and knocked at the door, and then made bold to walk in without being asked.”

One Sister slept in the attic while the other watched with the patient, and so they took it, turns about all through the rest of the night. From his blanket lair beside the fire, Stephen knew them coming and going. . . . He had never slept so sweetly since the Shadow had darkened their home.

In the end the Sisters stayed three days, doing their rounds between whiles. What sunshine did they not bring with them. What laughter and gentle jests. What a reverent hush filled the living-room when together they said their Rosary, or knelt for the length of three *Aves* at the sound of the Angelus bell. For the triples rang from Tolleymead Church tower as they ring in other villages, all over this our England up to the present day. And when they parted from their new-made friends, what a void they left behind them,—if partly bridged with promises of coming back again.

Malvina would have named the baby after them, but neither of the Sisters would hear of it. One name there was for a girl, they said, and that their favourite one. But Mrs. Braby would please herself. Well, but what was their favourite name? . . . And what would it be but Mary. . . . And so it was decided, to every one’s content.

The question had been settled in Stephen’s case by re-

sort to the *Sortes Biblicæ*, a method of divination in favour with Malvina's motherly friend. You thrust a pin between the leaves and opened the volume at random. Where the pin indicated, there you chose your child's baptismal name.

When it came to the question of the baby's second name, Stephen, being sent for the Bible, brought *The Pilgrim's Progress* by a mistake, only realized when they opened at the pin. The last two words of the paragraph appended here were indicated:

"Indeed," quoth she, *"I cannot stay, for I am in haste to end my journey. Long have I dwelled with my husband and my sons in the City of Destruction, but he is gone before us, and we are on our way thence."*

So 'Mary Waythence' were the names whispered by her godparents to the Rector, who affixed them to little Miss Braby without turning a hair.

2

Mary Waythence was a fortnight old when the Faggis's called at the cottage. Some little bird may have carried the news to Lower Holloway.

Mrs. Faggis, glorious to behold in a bonnet trimmed with feathers and flowers, and a Paisley shawl of many hues, brought with her a covered basket, containing many comforts for Malvina and the child. And so genuine was the kindness of the homely soul, a worthy mate for her husband, that Malvina could not find the heart to refuse her offered gifts.

With the eatables in the basket came some little sets of baby-clothes, laid away in lavender years before, and never wanted again.

"Which Them above knowed best, my dear," said Mrs. Faggis, "though it would have been a comfort, when our dear boy were called away, if another had took his place. Not that another could or would. But his little bed in our attic has stood there empty through the years that have wrinkled his mother's face."

"'Tis a comely face, wrinkles or none, an' hullsome as

a winter-apple," said Malvina, stating the simple truth as she touched the good woman's hand.

"And you're a Beauty, that you are, and so I tell you plainly," returned the Missis, beaming over her brilliant bonnet-strings. "And you and me are friends, I hope! My Ben has spoken of you often—and both of us has took to your dear boy, Lord bless his bonny face! And so, a kindness betwixt friends being nat'ral and not a favour, you'll take what I'm a-going to say as properly you should. This toosy-woosy winkum wums, a-lying here as good as gold and blowing precious bubbles, 'ud bear me out if she could speak,—as I wish you well, my dear. Wouldn't you, my black-eyed blessing!" cried Mrs. Faggis, falling back upon admiration of the baby, whenever her womanly tact gave hint of thin ice beneath her tread.

"Dunnot think but I'd ha' knowed it when I laid my eyes upon yo'! Even wi'out the kindness as th' boy ha' met fro' yo'!"

"Little enough, though the darling boy would ever make a deal of it. Which brings me to the thing, my dear, I'd got it on my mind to say. As its common talk, and couldn't but be, a village being given to gossip, as you and your good gentleman have parted company. On a difference of opinion regarding the Braby Money,—and differences there are in life, gainsay the truth who may. And what is meat to one may well be Poison to another, my Great Aunt Gann being a living proof, with eating whelks throughout the year. Also mussels—whenever possible to smuggle into Poplar Workhouse,—which but one would lay me screaming low with hot plates to my front and side. So you're right in choosing Poverty before Wealth, not holding the wealth right come by, and Steve do well to cling to you, whatever may befall! But do you do right by him and yourself to stay on here in Tolleymead, when there's a opening offered to better both your lives? Don't answer now. Let me prose on in my own unedicated fashion, as were nothing but a Charity-girl when my First throwed his eye on me. Running herrands and washing the steps, and cleaning a lodging-house kitchen, with every second Sunday out

and never an hour in the week. And yet able at this time o' day to befriend, in a manner o' speaking, a noble creetur' like yourself, if she'd but let me, dear! Offer herself and her boy a home, for the present at Lower Holloway, having empty rooms, and more furnitur' in the shop than my Ben will ever sell. A help in the house you'd be to me, more than worth the wage I'd pay you, and the boy could earn his keep with Ben till he gets a Market berth. So now you know. If you're vexed with me, you're not the woman I think you. But you ain't. Is she, my Pudsey-dud, a-smiling all over your face?"

Then there was a silence while Malvina thought, and Mrs. Faggis waited.

"I'll not deny," had said Malvina at length, "but 'twould be wise to go. An' a time may come when I'd take for Steve the kindly home that's offered, knowin' him like to be no charge, when once he got a place. But onless us could bide together, him an' me, an' th' baby wi' grateful thanks for yo'r goodness, I'd choose th' Nazareth House."

"The Nazareth House at Hammersmith? . . . Were that your meanin', deary?"

"Nazareth House be th' name o' the place. Where th' Sisters live," said Malvina, bending her motherly eyes upon the sleeping babe at her breast. "'Tis full o' folk both old an' young, men an' women an' children. Elsewhere the old 'ud be Paupers. Elsewhere the children 'ud be charity-brats an' dressed in charity clothes. But at Nazareth House, Poverty be no disgrace, an' whatever yo'r religion, yo're welcome for love o' th' Blessed Poor Man, an' His Mother, as kept His sayings in her heart. So whenever I take my foot in my hand and look my last on th' wheatacres, 'twill be Nazareth House for my lamb and me. For th' boy——"

She said no more.

3

Subsequently to the confirmation of a rumour which had temporarily unhinged the village, the Rector of Tolley-mead, whilst shaving, inflicted a gash upon his chin. Brought over from Wheatstone by a mounted groom in the

employ of Mr. Gregson Grundall, a note, delivered by a fluttered maid, was the cause of the casualty.

“Da-ear me!” exclaimed the Rector, applying a towel to the effusion.

“Is anything the matter, dear?” called his lady from the adjoining room.

When she entered with court-plaster, a cobweb and a pair of scissors, the Rector, with a lathery countenance, was reading for the second time the letter appended below.

“THE BRABY ARMS,

“BRABYCOTT,

“—*th* May, 1873.

“REVEREND SIR,—

“Being shortly to enter into ockupation of my Famaly Residence I am, until Brabycott House is reddy to receive me, established at the above where kindly adress reply.

“A suitable staff of Servants have been ingaged for Brabycott under the suparintendence of Mrs. Sophy Petcher, my Housekeeper whose servaces my worthy and respected friend Gregson Grundall Esq. has temporarily relinkwished in my favour. When all is reddy I shall hope to have the honour to receave yourself & lady amongst my earlist gests.

“As the Pew bilonging to my Familly has not been ockupied of late years, I shall be oblidged if you will have it put in proper repare and renew the cushuns of Saime which are in a very dilappadated stait for which Purpose I enclose the sum of £10 hearwith.

“I shall with your permission call shoartly at Tolleymead Rectory, and earnestly hope by a reggular atendance at Church on Sundays to benefitt by the spirittual teechings contaned in your sermons, and the Services which I humbly trust no Rittualistic & poapish pracktices will ever be permitted to mar.

“Meanwhile I should be graitful if you would akord me the Benefitt of your Advise upon a mater of a Pressing and Delicate nature touching my fammaly rilations & remain,

“Dear Sir, Faithfully yours,

“WILFRID THOMASSON BRABY

“Of Brabycott.”

"I seemed to know the fellow's fist," spluttered the Rector, who had reason; having not so long previously committed to the flames some dozens of School copybooks inscribed in a similarly bold and flourishing roundhand with precepts not all uniformly wholesome for the young. "And I opened it to find this—arah!—hotch-potch of—of—impudence and assurance. 'Ritualistic or Popish practices' indeed. Because the choir wear surplices, and turn to the East at the Creed! And this from a poaching scoundrel! A dissipated, intemperate loafer, who has never set foot inside the Church since I have held the living, I believe."

"He is one of the Ringers," said the Rector's wife, picking up the crackly enclosure, which had slipped from the Rector's fingers to the floor, and smoothing it carefully out.

"He is one of the Old Ringers. But ringing other people in to attend Divine Service is not the same as attending it yourself," said the Rector in his weightiest tones. "And this Braby of the Wheatacres——"

"Is now Mr. Braby of Brabycott. Through the discovery, the gardener says, of a Will, or something of the sort."

"Pish! Even if a Will had been found, it couldn't have been proved so quickly. Do you think this Grundall—— Have you seen the man?"

"Don't speak of him, Recky dear!" In tender or playful moments she addressed her Rector as 'Recky.' "That purple man with poppy eyes is one of my chief bugbears."

"Strive against prejudice, Clara. Braby appears to respect him. What is that paper in your hand? . . . The—arah!—Thank you, my dear!"

The Rector folded the crackly bank-note and slipped it into his note-case. His wife, who had perused the letter, enquired:

"Shall you grant what this person asks?"

"My duty is not to withhold advice from parishioners who apply for it."

"Perhaps it has to do with his wife," said the Rectoress with feminine intuitiveness. "You know his wife?"

“By sight, of course. A young woman, extraordinarily tall!”

“And large, Recky. I *may* be wrong, but for a woman to be of such height and size *does* seem to me indelicate. Then, too, she has an accent of a frightful kind: Yorkshire, or Irish possibly.”

“H’m! Does Mrs. Braby attend Church?”

“I am able to answer—no! Not even a Mothers’ Meeting, or a Parish Jumble Sale.”

“Hah!”

“What she said about the Jumble Sale was told me by Pover’s daughter. . . . The one we tried as nursery-maid, who didn’t suit at all. . . .”

“What did Mrs. Braby—arah!—say, my dear?”

One attempts to convey a peculiar sound, filling pauses in the Rector’s sermons, while he cursorily peeped at the MS. notes on the cushion of the pulpit-desk, and employed by him with impressive effect in the lapses of ordinary conversation.

“Why, that if she must wear ‘worn-out duds,’ and ‘clouts,’ I think she called them—she preferred her own to other folks’.”

The Rector cleared his throat.

“Hrr’mph. Would you tell Jenkins to be ready with the brougham to take me over to Brabycott at—arah!—not before lunch, I think. . . . Two is a favourable hour. And I will finish shaving now, and dress, if you will excuse me!” The Rector added, as his Rectoress retreated towards the door, “So Mrs. Petcher is housekeeper. . . . Do I know this Mrs. Petcher? In the service of Mr. Grundall, and released to oblige our friend? . . . He wishes to call at the Rectory, by the way. You will not be indisposed to receive him?”

“Oh no! But—Recky—I *do* hope he will not bring his wife!”

The historian has not on record the actual terms of the interview between the Rector of Tolleymead and Braby, that blackest of village goats, who sought at the eleventh hour to be folded with the sheep. But, despite himself the

worthy gentleman was impressed when ushered into the presence of Braby. Bathing, shaving, fine linen and good clothes had made such a difference in the man.

Moreover, though occupying private rooms at the inn, all green rep and red flock paper, hung with lithographed scenes from the Peninsular wars, and pervaded with whiffs from the bar,—despite spirituous or beery inducements to stray from the arid path of temperance, he was almost startlingly sober when the Rector was ushered in.

“And that fact,” said the Rector confidentially to his wife, “has impressed me most profoundly. For, practically, it was meeting a stranger. Or, say, a man from whom a devil had been cast out.”

Did no devil glitter mockery through Braby’s black eyes as he wove his web of illusion? Was he absent while the injured gentleman poured his confidences in the rectorial ear?

“Sacred and private confidences,” said the Rector, “which have filled me—arah!—with compunction, realizing as I must that I have misjudged a fellow creature so. As to their nature, even to the wife of my—arah!—bosom, I will be silent. Only let this be remembered: This man whom we have spattered with contempt is more sinned against than sinning!”

“I guessed it from the first,” returned the Rector’s wife, who had objected to Mrs. Braby’s size.

4

Malvina Braby had disapproved of girls and never wished to own one.

“Maids be muckheaps one and all,” she had been wont to declare. “Now a boy’s a boy. Yo’ knows what yo’ ha’ got to deal wi’ when yo’ gets one.” You never knew what you had got in Waythence. That was her charm.

Before this maid-babe, born under a sorrowful star, the mother fell down in adoration, nor was Stephen jealous of her worship, or reluctant to adore. To him the little red stranger was a toy; the quaintest of living playthings. Prettiness he discovered in her presently, not of ordinary

cherub-pattern, all rosy curves of gleaming flesh. She was sallow, with black eyes and hair. And though a passionate temper and stubborn will increased the likeness to Braby that her mother's eyes had recognized from the first hour of her birth—the cottage by the wheatacres was brighter for her coming. So much that is heavenly breathes about the sacred feebleness of a child.

And the babe brought gifts in its small shut hands for Stephen and Malvina. New ties, new interests for the boy. For the woman, a newer care. Another life, derived from hers, dependent on her utterly. Needing her every instant, for what none else could give.

The milk of her breasts, the strength of her arm, the cherishing warmth of her body. All her lost beauty came again, with the joy of being wanted so. She was wonderful to see in these days, now that the hollows of her cheeks were filled and their full and gentle oval showed the lovely carmine mantling beneath the sun-warmed skin.

Her great grey eyes spilled radiance, and the noble, purely-modelled features were more than ever Dêmêtêr's, as she bent over the sleeping child. Though the ashen-grey streaks in her wheat-red curls were ever-present testimony to the bitterness of the cup that she had drunk and the weight of the sorrows she had borne.

The baby was nearly four weeks old and the small hoard hidden in the bedstead was spent, all save the rent-money, when Malvina returned to work, taking her nursing with her by grace of the mistress of the Dairy, who had a tender spot for babies, possessing none of her own.

She was weary but hopeful on the Saturday noon. Her earnings were safe in her pocket, and the sum hoarded to pay the rent unbroken in its hiding-place. The farmer's wife had dropped a hint that Stephen might be re-employed by the farmer. True, he had vexed the master, but other lads were worse.

So Malvina prepared a little feast against Stephen's expected homecoming, for he had gone to London to see Faggis about a Market job. She set the table for supper, undressed and nursed the baby, and laid it down, as clean as a flower, in the cradle that had been her son's.

The living-room was spotless as its owner now, untainted by reek of liquor, and the savage odour of cheap cigars that had pervaded Braby's clothes and breath. And Malvina was fragrant as a meadow in June, and mellow as an apple from the orchard where King Pippins and Blenheims yet hung upon the boughs waiting a touch of frost.

You can see her by the soft rich yellow light of an afternoon in November, sitting at her bit of needlework while the little creature slept. In an old and oft-washed lavender print, with a wide white muslin kerchief covering her shoulders, and crossed over her bosom, and knotted at her back.

She was at peace, with worn household things about her who craved no new ones, her boy happy in his holiday and coming back that night. The baby sleeping in its rockered box as though it were a costly cradle, and the wages she had earned that week stowed safe in the cup on the mantelshelf.

And yet by that mystic, nameless sense that forewarns of coming trouble, as the peasant of the Alps scents the avalanche, or the Malay fisher the typhoon, she knew this but a breathing-space before another struggle. So a swimmer in rough seas might rest between one surge and the next.

She started at the sudden clatter of iron-shod hoofs and the bump of wheels upon the cart-track. Over the blind of the front window she saw that a carriage had stopped at her gate. A low open chaise of the basket kind drawn by a meek old pony, and driven by an elderly groom in dark green livery.

The green-liveried groom who drove the trap, a dry-faced, grey-haired fellow, squeezed to the very edge of the seat by the bulk of the man at his side, touched his hat respectfully to Malvina as he slipped from under the apron, and pushing open the garden gate came up the brick-laid path.

"Who be it?" asked Malvina, appearing on her doorstep.

"Mr. Grundall over from Wheatstone, ma'am," returned the elderly groom, looking back at the hulking, sprawling

shape of the occupant of the carriage, as though entertaining secret doubts whether this was really the fact.

"My gonnies!" gasped Malvina. "Donnot say as yon be th' Grower!"

"Him and nobody else," said the groom. He added as the figure in the pony-chaise waved a pair of large black flippers, and wagged its head, which was roofed with a hat of chimney-pot design: "He's more a marigold than a peony now, and he whispers instead of roaring, the mare having damaged his wocal cords when she shook him by the neck. An' he's got Religion—and got it bad. Yet you'll find, like other people, he's wonderful little changed inside for a man as be so altered out!"

"What's come o' the mare?"

"He've sold her to the butcher at East Marnet. No matter how the butcher beats her, poor lass! she'll get nothing worse than she's had. *I don't blame the brute myself,*" said the groom, dropping to a cautious whisper. "'Tis natural for beasts, as it is for men, to pay back ill-usage when they can."

"He's callin'," said Malvina as the subject of discourse uttered a strangled bellow, and gesticulated yet more wildly with the flapping black-gloved hands.

"That's to say, as if you'll set him a large-sized chair he'll come inside and speak to you. Don't seem to notice when he swears, it drives him rampin' wild!"

And the groom hurried back to the pony-chaise to assist his debilitated employer, who had sunk so low in the cushioned back seat that the apron was menacing his chin. Still a three-decker chin, but of tallowy hue, and gone flabby like the rest of the Grower, whose moppings and mowings as his serving-man extracted him from the vehicle, and set his goloshes on the garden-path, were hideous to behold.

Malvina had duly set the armchair, and profited by the slowness of their progress to take unseen from the bedstead hiding-place the hoarded quarter's rent, dropping it by an afterthought into the china cup on the mantelshelf—when another faint bellow reached her ears, and she hastened to re-open the door.

And there was the Grower on two walking-sticks, cursing

the groom in whispers, for all that his huge splay feet were set on the Hard and Narrow Way. . . .

"Mrs. Braby,"—he raked her with fierce, veinous eyes as she dropped her little curtsy,—“I’m coming in,” said the gasping croak that alternated with his strangling roar. “You, Joyce, put me into that armchair and get out until you’re wanted. Drop me—and I’ll flay you, by——” He gulped down the rest of the swear. “Well, Mrs. Braby,” he resumed, wallowing and grunting as he hauled his black-covered, brass-clasped rent-book from the side-pocket of his creasy frock-coat. “D’ye guess why I am here?” . . .

“Maybe ’twould be to do wi’ the rent,” said Malvina in her deep soft accents. “The September quarter’s owin’ yo’.”

“And another month as well. Come, my good woman. Why haven’t you paid?” snarled Grundall. She told him simply.

“Fur th’ reason that nobody came fur th’ brass, and I were laid up off my feet.”

“Hah!”

As the Grower’s savage eyes rolled in the direction of the cradle, Malvina moved to the fireplace, and took the money from the china cup.

“Here be th’ brass, master,” she said, tendering the silver coins, while retaining her position so as to shield the innocent sleeper from his sight.

“Well, better late than never!” croaked the Grower, clutching and pocketing the money. “Get me a pen and a dip of ink,” he added in his usual form. “This time I’ll overlook delay, but don’t be late again, ma’am! ‘One Pound Ten Shillings Duly Received from Mrs. Malvina Braby.’” He filled in the receipt and the counterfoil, and tore it from the book and gave it her, whispering, “But Two Pounds Two next time, for the rent is raised, Mrs. Braby. Three-and-six per week from now, instead of Half-a-crown.”

Her heart sank leadenly in her breast and her knees so weakened under her, that to the Grower’s secret joy she laid her hand on a chair. How meet that ruthless extra charge when every nerve was straining to pay the rental as it was? Almost she pleaded with this man.

But through those ugly windows in the face that was yellow instead of crimson, something looked back that silenced her. He beckoned her to come nearer, and gasped.

“Why don’t you speak up for yourself? Haven’t you got anything to say to me?”

“‘Say,’ master? Nought as I know of.”

“Why not complain?” croaked the Grower. “Protest against the rapacity of the landlord, hey? Or have you got such a stocking-full of cash that a pound one way or t’other don’t matter much to you?”

“It matters so much, as well yo’ knows,” she answered his creaking whisper, “as th’ money I pay to yo’ fur rent be coined flesh an’ blood!”

“Do something, then, to make it less,” said the Grower in his ugly whisper, thrusting his huge body forward as he grasped the arms of the easy-chair. He added, seeing her quick recoil, and recalling past essays of gallantry repelled by Malvina at the length of an exceedingly powerful arm, “No, no! I’ve got religion, ma’am! No more of mauling women! But the old man’s Will. . . . Braby showed it me. . . . Well, where has he got it now?”

“Didna’ he take it to Wheatstone, when he went over wi’ Rumbold?”

The Grower churned his saliva for one rabid moment, and croaked:

“He did, and I read the cursed document and the pair of them took it away again. . . . Come! . . . Where has Braby hidden it? . . . Can you lay your hands on it, eh? . . . Is anything wickeder than Distrustfulness? Have I been a friend to your husband? Noble? Unselfish? Disinterested? Ay? Then treat me as I deserve!”

He wiped his face that was streaming now, with a huge white cambric handkerchief that had replaced the vari-hued bandannas he had loved to sport, and took off his great silk chimney-pot, and mopped the leather lining-guard and replaced the hat on his bullet head and wagged the head at her.

“You won’t, Mistress. You’re dumb as stone. Well, well, I wash my hands of you! And yet I’d made up my mind to speak to Braby about the rent. For I’ve not put it

up on you, mind!—but your husband who owned the freehold, and has a fancy to own it again, which my kindness can't withstand. The generous heart will overflow——”

She cried:

“Be Braby landlord? . . .” And consternation was in her face and her voice beyond control.

She might have stooped to entreat the Grower, but her calm, sane judgment saved her. Even though Braby owned the cottage, she was tenant and nothing more. She profited by no tainted coin of the dead old slaver's money. She would work her hands to the bone, if need were, to pay the extra rent. And if she could not pay, well! well!—beyond the cottage doorstep lay the world that she had wandered before she met her Fate.

Now through the souging in her ears and the beating in her bosom came Grundall's stertorous whisper:

“You'll mind that, Mistress, hey? . . .”

“I ha' no choice,” she answered him, “to mind it or not mind it.”

“But all the same you'd rather pay next quarter's rent to me. Well, you won't be able to do that, for Braby has the cottage. The devil knows why,” creaked Grundall, “if it ain't to keep his eye on the handsome wife who's pitched her cap over the mill!”

He rolled his bullet head at her, and gasped as the wide-flanged hat-brim made a shiny jet-black halo round his puffy yellow face. And despite the fact that his maunderings seemed aimless as the babble of a drunkard, they seemed the prelude to something she had waited for many days.

“I know you, ma'am. You can't fool me with your show of honesty and high-mindedness, masking, twixt yourself and the bed-post, a stubborn woman's will. They knew in the good old-fashioned days how to deal with trulls o' your sort. Bridles or ducking-stools, by the Lord! We're too tender-hearted now.”

His eyes were like those of an angry bull, and streaks of blackish purple were scrawled upon the background of his ugly tallowiness. His wallowings had dragged his collar askew and undone his black string necktie. And though

his grossness burned her blood, there was something pitiable about the man. It may have been the pity in her eyes that stirred his gall to frenzy. He could have spat in her colourless face, but he stayed his venom awhile. He would bring the angry red into those cheeks before he had finished with the woman. . . . What right had a travelling tinker's wench to dignity and pride?

He whisked out one of the white handkerchiefs that had replaced his gaudy bandannas, and mopped his shiny countenance and blew his big hooked nose. Such a nose as a carpenter's boy for a joke might saw out of a bit of planking. An obstreperous nose, overshadowing a desert of bristly upper-lip. Then he stuffed the handkerchief away, and whispered, glaring at her:

"What you think of my dealings in respect of the house, you'll be able to tell your husband." He hauled at the chain of his big gold watch. "I've arranged to meet him here, for a little family council, and as he dined at the Rectory, I shouldn't be at all surprised if he brought the reverend gent. A meeting, hey?" He rubbed his hands, gloating over the change in her, the quivering of her features, and the tumult of her heart. "You'll find Braby improved out of knowledge, by the way. He's got me to advise him," said the Grower, "and when Gregson Grundall befriends a man, he befriends him. Mind you that!"

He had come, hoping to steal a march on the man he boasted of befriending, and had gained nothing by his coming. Hence Grundall's bitterness. And at any minute Braby—— A sound of hoofs and carriage-wheels on the cart-track came to his hearing. The Brabycott brougham, all furbished up, and drawn by a pair of his horses, was pulling up at the garden-gate from which his groom was backing the chaise.

5

A short, dapper man in a white felt hat got out of the Brabycott brougham, and turned obsequiously to assist a heavier companion to descend. The Rector of Tolleymead, no one less, portly, polished and beaming, speckless

from the crown of his polished silk hat to the tips of his square-toed shoes.

“Permit me, sir. My poor abode . . . Too honoured by your coming! . . .”

It was Braby’s voice. . . . The room whirled round before the dizzy eyes of his wife. After so long, dear Lord!—dear Lord! His step on the brick-laid pathway! She might have swooned, but for a feeble cry that came from the cradle at her side.

The baby’s cry recalled her strength. Bending over it, fondling and soothing, she was able to hide her agitation, compose her working face, and give to Braby—as to the Rector, crossing the cottage threshold—her little curtsy, that was like the dip of a tall flower before the wind.

Whether or not his sharp black eyes were aware of her renewal of beauty, the Rector, honest, fussy gentleman, was visibly impressed. His wife’s account had led him to expect a coarse virago. He found a woman of peasant type, simple in speech and mien. “What eyes!” thought he, as a man may think who is not bound to celibacy. “What a wonderful sweep of red-gold curls. What a throat and bust and arms! And what a mellow voice she has! True, her hands are coarsened by her work, but their shape leaves nothing to be desired. And her feet, dear me! even in clumsy shoes,—why, a Duchess might envy them!”

Thus thought the Rector as he bared his smooth and shining baldness, and with a few neat, pastoral words shook Mrs. Braby by the hand. The hand struck him as deadly chill. Its coldness had startled Braby, as he had formally touched it with his own an instant or so before.

Now he offered his wife a chair, which she declined with a gentle inclination, and seated herself near the sleeping child, on a stool with a mended leg. He had broken the stool in a drunken fit, she remembered, as he placed on the dresser, beside the Rector’s beaver, his brand-new white felt hat.

He was washed and shaved with scrupulous care, and his beard and moustache had given place to a pair of elongated whiskers, that framed between two wedges of

shiny black his narrow sallow face. Malvina suspected him of dye, and indeed his jetty blackness gave rise to the suspicion that Art had been called in to conceal the ravages of Time.

He wore a single-breasted black velvet coat, and a double-breasted shepherd's-plaid waistcoat, whilst shepherd's-plaid trousers of ample width hid his little patent boots. Even in his most degraded days he had been vain of his delicate hands and feet, and nice as to the whiteness of his linen, as his wife, that patient slave and drudge, had had good cause to know. . . .

A cascade of scarlet satin cravat, with a diamond horse-shoe in it, struck the note of discord in his dress that his mouth made in his face. A gold-framed eye-glass swung from his neck by the thin gold chain of the period. A thick gold guard of Albert type was looped across his vest. And the heavy watch-chain ended in a watch that had belonged to his late father. An oval gold chronograph, with repeating chime, that he had coveted as a boy.

The flaring cravat, in Malvina's esteem, was anything but 'seemly-appearing.' The diamond horseshoe reminded her of glass trinkets sold at fairs. And the white felt hat to her sober mind was headgear for a professional pugilist, or a racing tipster, or a Cheap Jack. . . . She surveyed it with disdain.

That Braby knew his wife disapproved of his gaudy taste was certain. His glance shunned hers, and his shoulders hunched, like those of a sulky boy. His vanity was wounded by her staid composed demeanour. Could he have known what a tumult raged in her, would he have been content?

A glance of understanding had mutually passed between Braby and Gregson Grundall when the former had ushered the Rector across the threshold of the home. Malvina had seen the glance exchanged, and a sickness gathered at her heart as the pair shook hands effusively, and Grundall, removing his tall silk hat, made a floundering attempt to rise.

"For me? . . . Pray no! My dear sir, no!" cried the Rector, pained by this homage, as he literally seized the

Grower in his arms, and thrust him back into his seat. Into which he squelched like an oilskin bag full of some thick rich liquid, while he whispered respectful protestations and blinked at the clergyman. "Positively, no! . . . Not on any account. . . . Really, I could not permit it. . . . Newly convalescent, as I am informed, from illness of a serious kind. . . . We heard of an accident? Let me—*arah!*—hope no permanent disability will follow. You have," said the Rector solemnly, "been mercifully preserved!"

And Grundall creaked back like a rusty hinge, as the reverend gentleman beamed at him.

"I have, Mr. Rector!—that's what I have. And its left me an altered man. You've heard of me as a sinner, sir. A regular tough Customer. . . . Don't deny it, sir! It was true. But—though late,—I've come to the Throne of Grace!"

His great face glistened unctuously. He wagged it at the Rector, who, seated in the Windsor chair at the table-head, seemed occupying his rightful place. As Chairman, let us predicate, of a small religious meeting. And further Grundall would have addressed the Chair, but that Braby interposed:

"Mr. Rector—My dear and valued friend, in the humility of his noble atonement, is too ready to bear—the onus—shall I say?" The Rector nodded assent. "Thank you, dear sir! The onus, then, of wrongs that have been inflicted on the unworthy subject who addresses you by—persons who are now dead."

"You refer to your father and sister, I fear. Let me ask you to forgive the injuries—and I do not doubt they are genuine—that you have endured at their hands. Be kind to their memories, Mr. Braby," said the Rector with some emotion, "in view of a day when you and I shall need tolerance and forgiveness ourselves."

"Now that's the advice," gasped Grundall, "of a first-class Christian gentleman! When old Greg. Grundall sent for you from what might have been his dying bed, and said, as well as he could speak: 'This here lost Will of your father's has turned up, and I don't propose to fight you,

but to put you in possession of the property at the earliest possible date. Subject to a amicable arrangement which I'll lay down the lines of—' he acted—that's what Gregson did—in a similarly Christian way."

"Quite so, quite so," agreed the Rector, joining his plump white finger-tips. "Meanwhile I am here at your request,—by permission of the mistress of this house." He bowed across the table to Malvina, who bent her head in answer. "For what purpose," continued the Rector, "I must own, I am not particularly clear. Time flies, and as a matter of fact I have a Vestry Meeting at seven. Will you—arah!—be good enough to explain what you want of me?"

"It's not easy," returned Braby, wetting his dry lips, "to speak plainly when people are listening. . . . Those people, I mean, who are likely to misunderstand, or be wounded by what one may say. What I was when the hand of this generous friend"—he theatrically indicated the Grower—"lifted me out of the mud is well known. I needn't refer to it here."

"Put it short and sweet," wheezed Grundall, rolling his head luxuriously. "A drunken, loafing scallywag. That's what you were, old chap! And now you're Braby of Braby-cott, thanks to the Mercy of Providence. Providence and old Greg. Grundall, working together for righteousness. . . . Lord! what a change a man feels in his heart when he's been to the Throne of Grace!"

"A change indeed," said the Rector, contemplating the Grower doubtfully, as the canting scoundrel rolled his head and smiled the smile of the just. "But with regard to the Will. May I ask——" The Rector addressed himself to Braby. "You are assured that the document is genuine? . . . Then enlighten me. . . . Has it been proved? . . ."

"I'll answer for Braby and answer for myself. It has NOT!" returned Grundall emphatically.

"Then why not?"

"For the reason that Braby and me," said the Grower, "have finished for good with the Law. Once bitten, twice shy. These here Equity sharks have gulped down two-thirds of the property. What's left I hand over to Braby, and keep——"

“The Will?” asked the Rector with point.

“Not the Will. He’s got that, or old Rumbold, his pal, is keeping it snug in some corner. What old Greg. has got out of it, reverend Sir, is the cleansing of his heart and his soul! A Reservation in Heaven in exchange for worldly possessions. What are possessions after all!” cried the Grower in his stertorous whisper, “compared with the riches as a man may draw for nothing from the Throne of Grace! Wherefore the arrangement betwixt Braby and myself, is that he shall take over the Property, which was sold by order of the Court of Chancery three years ago, to me; I guarantee him a income of Eighteen Hundred and upwards,—and I place a lump sum to his account at the Hertfordshire and Middlesex Bank.”

“While the Will remains unproven, I think?” the Rector remarked suavely.

“Unproven, Mr. Rector!” said the Grower, rather taken aback. “And Gregson Grundall, the Defendant in the Case,—who won it, you’ll maybe remember? Grundall is still in the eye of the Law the owner of the property.”

“And Mr. Braby is satisfied,” asked the Rector, “that you treat him fairly?”

Braby bent his head to the clergyman over his flaming satin cravat.

“Satisfied, Mr. Rector, for the reasons previously explained to you. Between the devil and the deep sea”—there was sardonic humour in his smile.

“Chancery is the deep sea, I presume?” hazarded the Rector.

“And Gregson Grundall is the Devil, I suppose,” creaked that worthy, wallowing in his chair.

“I feel sure—” began the Rector, “nothing offensive was intended——”

“Let him insult me,” said Grundall, “if he likes. I bear no malice, bless you! I’ve forgiven him worse than that since I bowed as a sinner at the Throne of Grace. Wasn’t it him, a young booby of eighteen, who caught me making love to Ann Braby, and went and blabbed to his father, and got me in trouble with my own? . . . I was a regular young

blackguard then. Now I'm able to own it. Oh what a blessed thing it is to have come to the Throne of Grace!"

So this sordid quarrel was the root of the feud between Braby and his family. . . . The Rector glanced at Braby as Grundall panted on.

"I've said I was a thorough young blackguard then. There's the truth for you, Mr. Rector. A tipping Junior Partner of the Firm, just out of his Articles to his dad. A swearing, gambling, whoring chap—(that's what the old man called me)—who aimed at an heiress, and planned to mix his own with the Braby blood. The Braby blood! And what was it but the blood of a Liverpool merchant," gasped Grundall, blinking through the sweat that streamed over his large round face. "A tough old trader in nigger-flesh like his father was before him—with more murders on his wicked old soul than——"

"Really, Mr. Grundall, I must beg——"

"Your pardon, reverend gentleman," said Grundall, apparently stricken. "For a sinner cleansed at the Throne of Grace, what I said was wrong, I'll own!" He fumbled for the large white handkerchief and snuffled in it softly, dabbed at his eyes, gulped several times, and extended his dexter hand. "Will Braby, there has been ill will between us two, my Brother. Catch hold of that and shake it, lad, for I forgive you all! The hand of a pardoned sinner," said Grundall, gently blubbering, "I offer, in fraternal love, to you, my enemy!"

Braby got up to grasp the hand, and Malvina, as a woman dreaming, beheld him snuffling and mopping his eyes like the hoary humbug in the chair. Even the Rector, sensibly touched by this display of generous emotion, produced his own immaculate square of cambric, and blew his nose.

"Oh, what a mercy it is," said the Grower, exultantly wheezing and smiling, "when a man's got Religion to such an extent as his enemy's his brother and friend! Me and Anna Maria were sweethearts, my Friend." He leered upon Braby horribly. "You put the kibosh on our courting, you did, and lost me my Partnership in the Firm."

"These harrowing memories, my excellent sir," the Rector tactfully hinted, "should hardly be—recalled, shall I say?—at the present place and time."

"My Dad was a sharp old codger," said the Grower, still addressing himself to Braby, "and yours was his wealthy client. So Greg. went overboard. Not as you did yourself much good, my Friend, by your spying and your tattling. *You* got kicked out of Brabycott when your sister was chief again. But you'd parted her and me, my Friend,—so I married the present Mrs. Grundall,—who had Land, and money to develop the Land—and went into the Growing line. Through you, my Brother, I was bound to a wife and a Business I didn't fancy! And the pleasantest dreams I had o' nights, my Friend, were of murdering *You*! Smashing your skull to bloody pulp. Yet to-day I can take you to my Boosom. Glory! Hallelujah! World without end, Amen!"

If the speaker had gnashed upon Braby with his teeth and stammered imprecations and curses, devoting the soul of his enemy to the uttermost depths of the Pit, these would have conveyed to Malvina's mind a less deadly impression of hatred—lasting, unmerciful, pitiless—than these utterances of pardon and love. And yet, though she shuddered with loathing of the man, so did not those others who listened. Braby snuffled. The Rector shed tears. They shook hands and the Grower went on:

"Ann Braby had ought to have got married, she ought! and the old man pretended to think so. But nobody was fit for his girl in his view, the obstinate, stiff-necked old chap! Started bullying her presently—that's what he did! And before you'd turn round, both were at it. Braby had got wind of—*I* never knew what!" said Grundall with elaborate innocence. "But I've an idea it had something to do with his daughter's being thick with some man."

With his glaring eyes, and the ugly hooked beak rapaciously jutting between them, he looked like a big bloated spider as he wrought at his cobweb of words. And that sense of calamity, following soon, weighed heavier on the soul of Malvina. The four walls of the room seemed to

crush her, and she longed to snatch the child up and fly.

"That was what drove Braby to send Ann away. He packs her to Brighton," said Grundall, "and sends off a groom to fetch over my dad, and he makes a new Will making Wilfrid his heir, and the Faggis's witness him sign. . . . And he sticks it away where he knows as it's safe, and sit down in his chair for a snooze. And never wakes up—and no Will can be found—but the one that leaves everything to Ann!"

"Sad, for our friend here," said the Rector, checking a yawn with plumply-cushioned finger-tips. "But for his sister one must say—Providential at the least!"

"She wasn't in that state of soul as she'd have acknowledged Providence," said the Grower, shaking his bullet head. "She'd have said she'd got her rights. She's dead and gone, Ann Braby is—but I'm bound to admit she was a sinner. And I've my doubts whether when she died, she'd found the Throne of Grace. She was in trouble and she took it hard; and when she sent for me by Petcher, the Funeral being over and the Will being proved—I did my best for her."

"Hah!" said the Rector, drumming his finger-tips softly on the table to a measure that suggested the congregation leaving Church.

"There was going to be a child," said the Grower, blinking and gasping and twitching. "She'd never own who was the father—she kept that a secret, you see."

"Hm!" said the Rector dubiously, breaking off in the middle of his voluntary. The Grower went on:

"When she went away to an unknown place with Petcher, it was under Petcher's sister's name that she passed while she was there. And before she came back to Brabycott, she sent the child to me at Wheatstone——"

"H'rump!" ejaculated the Rector, loudly clearing his throat.

"In a Christmas Hamper marked 'Perishable. To Be Opened At Once,' " said the Grower.

"Dear me, dear me, I find," said the Rector, "these details distressing in the extreme."

"Not more than I did, reverend sir," returned Grundall,

rolling his head at him. "Put yourself in my place, dear sir, when I cut the hamper-string!"

"I beg to decline. Positively to decline!" returned the Rector warmly.

"I hadn't got religion in them days and I took it like a heathen," wheezed the Grower. "If I'd been the man I am to-day I'd have took it to the Throne of Grace. But I'd given my word to Ann, poor thing! to help her in her trouble,—and despite the tongue of slander, sir, I was a father to that child!"

"You—arah!—have been credited," said the Rector, "with a paternal regard for the young lady."

"Het's a fine gal," gasped the Grower, "and she loves her Uncle Greg. And when her unfortunate mother died she sent me a message by Petcher. Not a letter, because she got her death by Smallpox—which is a catching complaint. And Ann was blind by having got it bad, and could only send a verbal message. And she thanked me from her heart of hearts, she said, for my chivalrous and noble conduct, and she'd left to my sole disposition all the property she'd got in the world. On the private understanding," puffed the Grower, who was getting badly winded, "that I left it back to Hetty. Without Conditions—in my Will."

"You—astonish me!" ejaculated the Rector.

"Now comes the kernel of the business." This Will having been found by Braby, I've put on my considering-cap and hit upon a plan. I hand over to Braby, Braby-cott, an income and a certain sum of money, without protest, on condition that he adopts Hetty as his niece."

The Rector stared, and turned his stare disquietingly on Braby, whose shifty gaze avoided his.

"And he accepts these terms?"

Grundall answered:

"He accepts, the girl being his natural niece, and she'll share with his son in the property. Het don't get on too well at home," added the Grower with his blinking grin. "A fine upstanding young woman she is, and the very spit of Maria. Braby you'd say, to the very backbone—whoever her father may have been! It's understood she'll be

treated with respect," he added in his whisper. "Petcher'll act as Housekeeper—but Hetty'll be mistress of the House."

A leg of the stool scraped on the floor—the leg that had been broken. Malvina had stirred for the first time since she had taken her place!

"Het and the Boy might Marry by and by, when the boy's had a bit of schooling. Manners and Learning and Tailoring have made a swell of a clod before now. And then the Property won't be halved," said the Grower with a rattle in his breathing. "And my girl will have the Braby name, since she ain't got one of her own."

"But whattan if Braby's lad 'ud clem rather than touch th' money, an' dwell as a bachelore for life, before he'd marry th' maid? . . . Her yo' calls Hetty—as swears like a groom, fur my own ears ha' heerd her!—'ull niver set at th' board wi' me nor rule the roost i' my home. So nobbut your doors 'ud stand open that long as th' ivy-bush covers th' lintel, an' the stars shine into th' cellars, you'll wait," said Malvina to Braby, "fur yo'r wife! As fur the boy, he'll frame to choose betwixt his father an' his mother. For I'll shift to addle my livin' i' this place—whether he goes or stays!"

Braby leaped in his chair as his wife's mellow tones wakened echoes under the rafters. He pounded the table with his doubled fist, and screamed in his high-pitched voice:

"Mr. Rector, I appeal to you! As a party to this discussion——"

"No, Mr. Braby! Far from it. An independent witness, if you please. To drag the—arah!—Established Church into the midst of a discussion of this nature—by the heels," said the Rector, "as you have done—is not—arah!—fitting, sir!"

"I'll be heard," spluttered Braby, plucking at his neck as though the red cravat were burning. "I am righted and reinstated, sir, but what is the good of this? If those who ought to help me up, drag me down, what can I hope for? Must I be branded to the end of my days as a drunkard in this place?"

"No, no, Mr. Braby! The most rancorous tongues must

be silent," protested the Rector, "in the face of a genuine change of life and a determined will to persevere. Christian charity still exists, as your friend, by deeds, has proved to you." He added as Grundall waved a hand in humble abnegation of his praises, "Be cheerful, Braby, I counsel you. And you, my dear Mrs. Braby! Exhort your good husband, as a true wife should, to look to the Future with hope!"

6

An opening, afforded by the clergyman's words, for something planned out previously, brought Braby's sullen head erect and a gleam into his black eyes. Another rapid, glimmering glance passed between him and Grundall, and once more Malvina sensed herself the object of concerted attack.

"Putting the question with respect to your cloth," returned Braby, controlling his fury, "how is my wife to exhort me to hope when her acts egg me on to despair? In this very first hour when my prospects are changed she deserts me. . . . She cuts herself off from me. . . . She'll not eat of my platter nor live under my roof, now my grandfather's money is mine. You are witness to-day of my final attempt to bring her to listen to reason——"

"Reason," said the Rector with displeasure in his face, "is not Recrimination. I observe that Mrs. Braby makes no reference to faults patent on your own side. Weaknesses—vices, of a kind both flagrant and distressing. No one could live in Tolleymead, sir, and remain in ignorance of these."

"Oh, if you take sides——!" began Braby with a shrug.

"I came here at your solicitation," returned the Rector, "to assist at a domestic consultation with counsel and advice. Let me remind you once again that my time is strictly limited, and beg you to confine yourself exclusively to the matter in hand."

"I'll be as clear and brief as I can," said Braby with twitching eyebrows. He gnawed his lips for a moment and went on, sometimes halting to wet them with his

tongue, "Mrs. Braby has—has listened to a statement of the terms of my settlement with Mr. Grundall. On those terms, I expect her to remove from this place and take up her abode under my roof. To her—and my son, I throw open my doors—the doors of a husband and father. To her and my son I would offer my hand."

"And your heart?"

Braby added:

"And my heart!"

His heart! He could speak of his heart. Eh, the men! thought Malvina as she sat by the cradle. Her eyes were cast downwards, her face was composed, but a tempest was raging in her soul.

"I presume we are waiting for Mrs. Braby to decide?" said the Rector, and glanced at the others.

She leaned to the cradle and rose to her height with the baby in her powerful arms.

"I be poorly reared an' but little taught, nobbut I ha' learned me one thing. An Oath as be swore on th' Bible munna be broke wi'out sin. An' when this man Braby asked o' me to marry him seventeen years ago, he swore wi' his hand on the Holy Book as the money he'd crave no more. The money as were the price o' blood and got by a deed o' Murder that set my heart like stone i' my breast when he told me how 'twere done. I were a mawther then. Now I be Thirty-five, an' little have I seen save sorrow, but no penny o' th' Braby money ha' iver soiled my hands. Nor iver shall!" said the mellow voice.

"And am I to swelter in poverty," shrieked Braby with a passionate gesture, "to the end of my life, because of a silly oath I took when I was a lovesick fool?"

"An oath be an oath," she answered him. "I swore one when us were wedded."

"G—d d—n it, 'Vina! are you mad?" screamed the raucous voice she knew. As he leaped to his feet, to strike perhaps, in the frenzy of his anger, the Rector caught his wrist and cried:

"Mr. Braby, recall yourself!"

"Recall myself! Can I help it, sir?" He clenched his hand and stammered. "Can I keep from losing patience

with a woman as stubborn as this? Let her live apart if she is set on it! Perhaps she has her reasons!"

"There are folks about here would say as much," wheezed the Grower, cutting in. "*We* know, Mrs. Braby! And you know!—and so does Mackilliveray, the ganger! Uncommonly wide-awake, that's what *he* is! You may take it we're knowing all round!"

"There be that betwixt Mackilliveray and me," she answered with her eyes on Braby, "as should part our wedded lives for good, but the sin o't binna mine!"

"Yet you were here with Mackilliveray alone," said Grundall in his hateful whisper, "the very day they found the Will. Your husband told me himself. He heard what passed—you Paragon of chastity and virtue!—when Mackilliveray bid you leave your home and set up house with him."

She looked at Braby, and read him clear as he winced and quailed before her. So this was the plan. The tables to be turned, the stigma hers, henceforth. . . .

"Do yo', my husband, speak to this?" She asked the question simply.

"How can I help it, 'Vina," he whined, "when it's the naked truth?"

Even as he uttered the slanderous lie, he trusted her not to denounce him. Even the cowardly whine in his voice made entreaty to her, the betrayed.

As she suddenly lifted a powerful arm he leaped back out of reach of her vengeance. But her hand was upraised in appeal, not in wrath. She said, with her eyes on his face:

"May the Lord strike me dead wi' your child in my arms, on this hearth yo' ha' darkened an' blighted, if iver I framed to be faithless to yo', in deed, or in thought or in word!"

She lowered the hand she had lifted but now in that solemn appeal to her Maker, and rocked the now wakening child on her breast, as it uttered its petulant cry. As though fascinated, Braby stared at the child, whose bright black eyes, so like his own, were opened on him widely,

whilst its gaping, toothless mouth again gave forth the peevish wail.

"A girl?" he asked as the summoned groom appeared on the cottage threshold, and the Grower was hoisted out of his chair and helped down the brick-laid path.

"A girl, an' the spit of yo'rself, poor lamb!" said Malvina, as the doll-like fists were brandished in impotent menace. She added as Braby's wavering glance dropped under the weight of her own: "So like yo' as I ha' my doubts 'twill be worse for her hereafter! but Lord forbid as I should love the litlin' less for that!"

His sallow face was stung to red. He looked cautiously about him. They were alone, the Rector having lent the Grower his arm down the garden-path. Loud in confabulation, their voices came to Braby. . . . He took the white hat from the dresser-ledge and blew a speck of dust from it, and now there was mockery in his eyes, and a jeering smile on his mouth.

"You remember what I said to you some time back about Burning the Ship, eh, 'Vina?" He added, seeing assent in her look: "This is the match to the tow!"

"So that be the way o' it, be it?" she gave back, confronting him with bateless spirit, as "Braby!" sounded from the garden in the Grower's whispering roar.

"The way of it. . . . The Braby way! . . ." he answered.

Said Malvina:

"Yo'r master's callin' yo', my man. Take yo'r foot in yo'r hand an' go!"

7

His retreating steps ground the brick-laid path he had made for dead Susan Parmint. The gate-latch clicked. The coachman drew up to the fence with the Brabycott brougham. The Rector stepped into the brougham alone, with handshakings for Grundall and Braby, with a vague, polite flourish of his shiny silk hat, intended for Malvina, she knew.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Braby!” he called to the woman at the window.

For the Rector, well-meaning gentleman, it had been anything but a good afternoon. As he bowled in the direction of the Rectory in the camphorous blue gloom of the brougham, some spasms of mental disgust were his at the part he had been made to play.

He recalled what had passed during his interview at ‘The Braby Arms’ with the husband. Braby had spoken ambiguously of a young man, cast out from home through a family misunderstanding, cut off from the ties of relationship and divorced from Christian influences; exposed to the temptations of village life before the age of twenty years.

The young man had taken a vulgar mate. An ignorant, untaught young woman, who had travelled with Irish tinkers about the countryside. . . . How should such a sordid union, the glamour of passion banished, be other than utterly wretched? Braby had asked with heat. At worse and graver faults in his wife than those he had admitted, he hinted, while affecting to cover these with a veil of reticence. And the picture of his own misery, driving him to despair and degradation, he drew for the benefit of his hearer, and coloured with a master-hand.

And yet . . . Appearances deceive, reflected the Rector sagely. But the woman looked so noble and had borne herself so well. . . . Again and again that afternoon he had been constrained to reluctant admiration. Forced to comparisons,—to say the least,—irreverent if not profane. . . .

Jael and Judith and Deborah, the Prophetess of ancient Israel. . . . The chaste Susanna; Naomi, and the Mother of the Maccabees. The Peasant Maid of Domrémy, and Another,—purer—nobler— Yes; when Malvina had lifted up her child before the faces of her judges, he, the Rector of Tolleymead, had thought of the Mother of Christ. . . .

So this was the thing she had felt in the air, the intangible evil that menaced! Spotless as snow, chaste as the sea, unshaken in faith to the faithless, her honour had suffered calumnious assault. She was branded adulteress—by *him!*

The mate she had pardoned, the man she had loved! Long after her accusers had left her she sat speechless and still by the cradle, overwhelmed by the shock of his attack. His was no baseless accusation brought against his wife in a passing fit of anger. Nay, but a clearly-thought-out plan for throwing her to the wolves.

Would you shun the stigma of some loathsome vice? Some infamous act committed? Then boldly accuse another of the thing that you have done! Point out in innocent, cleanly flesh the canker you are hiding, leper! Call judgments down from Heaven on heads less guilty than your own.

Clear as clear day Malvina's mind arrayed the facts in order. She saw herself the scapegoat of her wedded prodigal.

Thrown to the wolves! And in the act his eyes had asked for mercy. He had trusted to her not to accuse, even while he quailed before her look. He had trembled even as he posed in his cheap theatricality, as a husband whose anger at being left had bidden him burn the ship.

"Eh, 'tis full well to burn the ship when the cargo-money's in your pocket!" thought Malvina, stung to the caustic jest by her bitter scorn of him,—Gregson Grundall's puppet and tool!—yet to smart for the bargain, struck with the father of Maria Braby's child.

For Malvina had known, for many years, the story of the Christmas hamper, and the method by which Maria had got rid of the clog upon her life. The tale had always brought a frown upon her brow, and nipped her lips together. When women bring bastards into the world, thought she, they should face the world, by rights!

Tales of the girl's fierce temper and wild, ungovernable nature had circulated freely during these recent years.

Hetty appeared to unite in herself the rough coarseness of her reputed father, with her unwedded mother's warped and curious perversity.

Eh! what a woman! to have lost her decent name for Grundall, the big, red, roaring, savage man of violence and unscrupulous greed. Eh! what a rogue to have so made good his hold upon Maria's money, and framed the plan that won his girl recognition as Braby's niece.

And Eh! what a queer, queer place this world! Where women are pilloried for virtue, and Fidelity and Love and Sacrifice are as dirt under the feet of the crowd! Thus mourned Malvina, sitting on her stool beside her baby's cradle, while the November sun went down and darkness covered the land. . . .

Perhaps if Braby had come crawling back, burned the Will, and sued for pardon, she might have forgiven the Unforgettable, and taken him to her great wounded heart. But he did not come; he was never again in life to cross that threshold; and the voice that cried: "I forgive you!" was to cry in the ears of the Dead.

The baby, wakening hungry, cried. She took it and tried to feed it. No milk would come, to her dismay. Her breasts were very stones. She made shift to boil a little pap, and stilled its fretful wailing. When satisfied at last, it slept in her arms, she sat nursing it and thinking. . . . Eh! what queer thoughts will come to a woman in such a plight as hers!

At seven o'clock Stephen would come home. Whatever should she tell him? That he had a bad woman for mother to him? . . . She knew he would say it was a lie. Herb Honesty grew in Stephen's as in her own soul-garden. . . . He had from her the single heart. He was loyal. He would *know* it was a lie!

The blackbird chacked angrily in the orchard-close. Perhaps some prowling cat had scared him? The foxes barked in the coppice, and Stephen did not come.

The hunting owls were crying, as they moused along the eaves of the cornricks, "'Oo—'oo—'oo hoo!" and something gnawed in the corner where the bread-crock stood.

There were eerie flutterings in the chimney, and the candle burning on the table where Stephen's supper waited threw a shadow on the wall behind her that was monstrous, black, and grim.

Her own, or a Shadow from the Otherwhere, formless, and full of menace! Would she ever again taste peace under this roof? Never again, she knew!

Never before in all the years had the cottage seemed so lonely, or so full of curious noises that turned a body queer. There were scrabblings underneath the floor and rustlings in the ceilings; odd tickings came from the cupboards and cracks from the furniture. . . . In the turmoil of her heart and mind she longed for consolation. The babe was sleeping soundly now. She laid it in its cradle and reached the Book from the mantelshelf.

She placed it reverently on the table and opened the sacred pages, seeking some heavenly manna to stay her suffering, hungering soul. . . .

But her brain was too dazed with the shock she had undergone, and her eyes were too dim for reading. Not that they had shed a tear as yet. Like her breasts, they seemed changed to stone.

A thought came to her. She drew a pin from her dress and thrust it between the pages. Then she opened the Book, with her finger on the pin, at the Gospel of St. John. The pin indicated the final line of the twenty-fourth Chapter. Malvina drew a shuddering breath as she read: "Arise, let us go hence."

* * * * *

9

The postman had called on the previous day with a letter for Stephen from Faggis, maddening in its ambiguity, and prodigal in blots. It ran like this:

"If a Shaver as I knos is Wishful For to Ear Sumthin to Is Edwanteg E wil Blo the Bob and the Downer InkloSed in A Riturn Fair From Sowgit to Kings X & Meat the

UndeRsined punktool at covn GardEN MarKiT. 9 Am.
Sharp satty Buckley S end arKaid.

“yurs FatFuly

“B. FAGGIS

“P. s. the Mrs senDs Luv All rounD the Biggest LumP
to the BaibY.

“p.SS. she Sais Keep yur Ed in the Karrig & Not Git
sticken It owt the WinDer as yule Want wun if Yu As
the Luck to git J. Buckleys Job.”

Eighteen penny postage-stamps were enclosed. Stephen rose with the cocks next morning, scrubbed himself until he shone and put on his Sunday clothes. He wetted his mop of yellow hair in the effort to cure it of curling, lavished blacking on his Sunday boots, and looked in Malvina's glass.

He was several inches taller now, and nearly two years older. Not long to wait! he had told himself as his garments had straitened to his wear. As his jacket-sleeves had receded from his wrists, and his trouser-legs soared above his ankles, the piping voices, dumb so long, had sounded in his ears again.

And now. . . . Who knew what the day might bring? He glowed with anticipation as he made his way to Sowgate, the station of the long white gates.

The level-crossing reminded him of that night in the previous October. He remembered its anguish and terror now as one may remember a dream.

But a small cold shudder rippled down between Stephen's strong, square shoulders as the King's Cross train came booming in, and the porter found him a place.

If he had not lifted up his head, he thought, and rolled over amongst the cabbages, snatched from the hurtling, roaring Death by the fierce revolt of Life—he would have missed this railway-trip; his first as a passenger with a ticket, and the mysterious, joyful thing that waited at the end!

So the iron wheels beat out a song for Stephen on the humming metals as Colney Hatch, Alexandra Park, and

Crouch End were left behind: 'Here's-a-Market-job-A-Market-job-Coming-for-Stephen Braby. The-boy-who-put-his-head-on-the-rails-in-front-of-the-Down Express! Isn't-it-better-to-be-Alive-you sil-ly-Stephen-Braby. And com-ing-in-for-a-Market-Job?—Oh yes!—Oh yes! Oh-yes!'

Despite the shining novelty of the thing, the half-hour's journey seemed a long one to the boy who perched on the edge of the seat, and thought every stop meant King's Cross. . . . The terminus, crowded even then, had a curious shock in store for him. For, standing under a gas-lamp on the noisy, clanging platform, he saw, or fancied that he saw, the man Mackilliveray.

A moment, and the burly, red-headed man in the coarse, rough garments of his calling was lost to sight and Stephen made his way to the outer air. And for the sum of two-pence cash secured a lift to Covent Garden as a passenger in the vast interior of an otherwise empty van.

That the big black letters on the varnished tilt spelt 'BUCKLEY BROS., COVENT GARDEN,' seemed joyful presage of some good the Fates held up in store. 'Before this day be over I may have the right to sit here,' thought Stephen, as they clattered down Gray's Inn Road, and by Drury Lane, to the Strand.

The racket and jam of Wellington Street and the sights and smells of the neighbourhood went as instantly to Stephen's head as if he had taken wine. It was close on nine, and the roaring streams of barrows and vans and Market trucks piled up with Market produce were rolling away North, West and South, more slowly than they had come.

All the world seemed cracking walnuts, and spitting out the shells of them. Their fat green hulls were being stripped by women with brown-dyed hands. Chrysanthemums of gorgeous hues went nodding by in hampers, great pyramids of wine-dark grapes rode on men's heads in baskets, and masses of purple violets were heaped on the hagglers' trays.

"Vi'lets a penny! . . ." The November sun drew from their purple petals a fragrance that prevailed above all

other scents and smells. Even when the oil frying in a pan at a fish-shop caught the fire, the reek was sweetly tempered with the scent of violets. . . .

The van turned into Tavistock Street, passing a barrier of hoardings, over which showed new-built brick walls and ladders and scaffold-poles. They were building the New Flower Market here, the van-man's mate told Stephen, though it wouldn't be ready for a couple o' year, if it ever was wanted at all.

"The old Flower Market was good enough for Buckleys and other Growers," said the van-man's mate as he lent a hand to help Stephen in getting down. And somebody said behind him: "My Crikey, if this ain't the Shaver!" and Stephen was joyfully shaking hands with Mrs. Faggis and Ben.

B. Faggis, even redder and huskier than of old, wore a new peaked cap of moleskin and a new top-coat of broad-cloth, with a velvet collar and cuffs. Knee-tight trousers of drab cable cord, gradually expanding downwards, cast his shining boots into eclipse, and the varied hues of his silk handkerchief suggested a tulip-bed. As for his Missus, in a purple merino gown, a shawl of blazing tartan and a bright green bonnet trimmed with dahlias, her splendour took away one's breath.

"Deafenin', ain't it?" Faggis grinned. "Wot I calls slap-up an' no error. She's a fine woman in full fig, though I say it as didn't ought."

"And who ought to say it if you oughtn't?" demanded his wife, with spirit.

"If you're peckish, Shaver, save your edge," advised the hawker, evading the reply, "till we've got through the bit o' bis'ness as we've come up 'ere to settle. And then, my cove, you shall 'ave a blow-out at the 'Before an' After' in Bow Street, as'll put more strain on them buttons o' yours than they 'ave to do with now."

"But don't count your chickens before they're hatched," advised the motherly woman, "and remember, nothing's settled, though there's no 'arm in 'opes. This bein' said, us three goes up, in a quiet way to Buckley's, Mr. James havin' dropped the hint to us he were in need of a Boy."

Stephen's heart beat so that he could not speak. Nor did his friends expect it. They took him between them and marched him round to the Buckley's end of the Arcade. The nine-o'clock bell had sounded, and though the Market seemed thronged with people, most of the stalls were bare to the boards and the stallholders were counting receipts.

IO

"You look tired, Jem," said the pursy voice of James Buckley's stout old father, as he stood in the archway of the Arcade, smoking his invariable cigar. Beyond making him plumper and rosier and shorter of breath, the two years or so that had intervened since Stephen's introduction to the Market had dealt gently with the elder man, if not with his favourite son.

"I'm well enough, Dad," returned Mr. James, pencilling down a total, and transferring the takings of the day from his pockets to a wallet with a lock. "Why will you worry yourself?"

"Why do you? should be the question. Can't you stay down at Sidcup oftener than you do, and rely more on Groggard and the rest?"

"I trust in Groggard and the rest of 'em as far as a master-man can, sir. Trust 'em too much—and the next thing'll be, my losing my principal's cash."

"Meaning me by your 'principal.' Well, if you lost—though dash my buttons if I want to!—the cash'll be John's and yours when I go,—to play ducks and drakes with if you like."

"No need to talk of dying, Dad," said his son, "for you're as hearty and bowsy—as they say down in Berkshire—as any man of your age, weight and size."

"I know you care for your old Dad, Jem," said the father, rather huskily, clearing his throat and knocking off the ash of his cigar.

"My old father," returned the son, "who has been the best of men to me."

"But not as good as I mean to be by and by, Jemmy," cried the elder Buckley, with a hurry and heat of utterance

that made him gasp and pant. "When *The Venture* (sail and steamship of the British-African Company) comes into dock at Liverpool, with a cargo for T. B."

"Now what does all this mean?" said Mr. James, surveying his parent apprehensively. "Don't tell me you've ventured capital in another wild mare's nest! Didn't you promise John and me you'd stick to oranges and potatoes, with an occasional break-out, if you must and will, in American apples and such?"

"Well, so I have. But you can't deny,—there's a want of imagination in potatoes," argued the father. "Ain't there, Jemmy? Own it, now!"

"They pay!" his son returned.

"I don't deny they do pay uncommon," admitted the old gentleman. "And the Orange—though my rheumatics tune up at a single suck of one of 'em—the Orange, Spanish and Italian, has been a friend to me since I was a boy! But the Orange's nose—you'll understand I'm speaking metaphoric-ally, Jemmy!—will be put out of jint before very long by another kind of Fruit. . . . A Golden Fruit of Paradise, never before pop'larized in England,"—the old gentleman chuckled and rubbed his hands at the sight of his son's long face—"packed by Dame Natur' in tough cases that keep out dirt and grittiness. Fruit that keeps the black man sleek, and the Spaniard idle and lazy, and fattens their pigs for both of 'em for nothing, as you might say!"

"And is this precious fruit of yours that the pigs and the blacks are so fond of—likely to go down with Englishmen?" dryly inquired the son.

"That's where I'm safe on the doormat and my money as good as in my pocket," declared the exultant old gentleman, slapping his son on the back. "For though it's as common and as cheap as bullaces in Kentish orchards, it's so remarkable nice in taste (being something in the way of rich sponge-cake beat up with pine-apple cream) that it's as tempting to a Duke as to a Dustman, Jemmy. As for the Marchioness and the Milliner's girl, they'll take to 'em, I'll lay! There's a story, pop'lar amongst the Spaniards of them North-West Coast Islands, that the tree as bears 'em originally grew in the Garden of Paradise. And that when

Eve made that little mistake as has cost us so much trouble, the fruit she picked was this identical fruit I'm a-putting on the Market now! Like another kind of Sarpint, to tempt the Marchionesses and Milliners, Ha, ha, ha! Phoo! Phew! Wait, let me get my breath!"

"You'll lose it too much to get it again, if you work yourself up in that manner," said James Buckley, whose filial forebodings appeared likely to be justified, as the author of his being was rich imperial purple, from his muffler-edge to the inner rim of his low-crowned, shiny hat.

"All right, Jem, all right, my boy!" chuckled the old gentleman, taking off his hat, and puffing and blowing as he mopped his steaming head. "But when I think of the precious Rise I am a-going to take out of the importers, it sends up the pressure to such a degree that I must blow off or bust. Now I'm better!"

"I hope you are!" returned his son, looking at him anxiously. "And when is the first consignment due of the fruit that the blacks don't want?"

"Not before Febroary, Jem, when my banana-cellars will be ready. I'm getting some hot-water-pipes laid in to ripen the bunches off."

"Hot water pipes. . . ." groaned James Buckley. "And what do you pay for shipping? A fancy price, I'll venture to say, in freightage and import-dues!"

"It is a trifle stiff, my boy," admitted his father guiltily, not ceasing to smile, however, and briskly rubbing his hands. "But we'll let sleeping dogs lie."

"'Sleeping wolves' you mean, I think," grumbled James Buckley, "that when they wake will set on you and eat you out of house and home. For——"

The speaker broke off, being taken here with so violent a fit of coughing that his tall thin frame was shaken like a bulrush in a gale.

"Jemmy, Jemmy! I don't like that . . ." pleaded the old man anxiously. "It reminds me of your poor mother so much, that it keeps me awake at nights."

"It's only a bit of a cold I get, working about the hot-houses. And talking of them reminds me," said James, tugging anxiously at his brown beard, "we shall want

another lad and a couple of young men on the nursery at Applethorpe."

"Well, if you want 'em, have 'em, Jem. Why should you trouble to ask?"

"Because your money pays 'em, sir. John thinks with me that to house 'em in that vacant cottage in the lot next Groggard's would be best, with a woman to keep house, and clean. Faggis tells me he knows of one to suit, with a son fourteen or rising. A homely, decent body, he said, well known to himself and his wife. She could add to her wages, if she chose, by doing a bit on the Nurseries, and there'd be no more lodging at pubs, which is bad for the young men."

"Meanin' skittles an' swipes at all hours, and more bread-and-cheese than beef and mutton! *I* know, bless you, Jemmy my boy!" chuckled the cheery old man.

"I thought about eighteen shillings a week for the woman, with houseroom in the cottage—and eight for the boy would suit you, Dad."

"They've a reference, I suppose?"

"Ben Faggis is ready to back 'em. He was to bring the boy this morning, so if you'd like to see him yourself——"

"No, no! I'll see no boys! . . . Where's my girl Lou a-hiding? Don't tell me she's not come with you, this Saturday holiday! . . . 'Tell you, Jem, I've had enough of all this going to school. She was sweet enough, and merry enough and graceful enough for her old grandad without Music, Dancing and Deportment and all the stuff they teach. And——"

"Wait till you see the prizes she'll bring us home at Christmas!"

"I prize a kiss and a hug from my girl more than a row o' gilt books! Why didn't she come?"

"She has come. That's what I'm trying to tell you!"

"Well then, where is she?" grumbled the anxious grandfather.

"Run over with a note to Father Fleet from her mother," explained James Buckley. "He's at the Church in Maiden Lane most days from seven till four. Or if he's not, he lives close by. What's the matter with you now, Dad? . . ."

You wonder I 'like to let the child run about these streets alone?' Well, for one thing, my Lou belongs as much as us, to the Market, and for another, she's got a 'squire to see she comes to no harm."

"In the shape of young Ted Braybrooke, grandson of old Braybrooke of the 'Portico.' . . . I see him fighting a coster in King Street yesterday." . . .

"Did the coster lick?"

"Well, since you ask, he seemed to be getting his gruel."

"Then the chap who licked him will take care that nothing happens to Lou. Here's Faggis with his wife and the boy."

"Top o' the mornin', gentlemen. Me and my Mis-sus——"

"'Morning, ma'am," said the elder Buckley, with a bow. "Pleased to meet you, and so's my son."

"Mrs. Faggis and myself are friends of several years' standing," said Mr. James with a hearty shake of the good woman's hand. "And I hope I may never see her look less young, handsome and blooming than——"

"Than she do to-day!" cried the hawker. "Brayvo, Mr. Jem!"

"And thank you for the kindly words, I'm sure," said his beaming partner, "though I could wish to see yourself a bit more hearty, sir!"

"I told you, Jem," said Buckley, "everybody notices!"

"Oh, nonsense, Dad! . . ." returned the son, with something like a frown. "So this is the boy. . . ." He pulled his beard. "I've seen you before, I rather think. Haven't I?" he asked of Stephen, who, not content with touching his cap, had snatched it from his curly head. "Two years back, or rather less. . . ."

"Yessir!" gasped breathless Stephen. "An' what you says to me that day—I haven't done it yet. But I've tried my best!"

"Nor better than his best no man can do," remarked Faggis.

"Nor neither Boy," interposed his wife, "as I have heard on yet."

"I'm bound to own forgetfulness of what I said on the occasion. Perhaps you can remind me, though," suggested Mr. James.

"You said, when you had asked my name, and I'd answered 'Stephen Braby,' that when I'd growed taller by a foot you'd find me a Market job. 'Might be in another three or four years. . . . When you're sixteen,' you tells me."

"Well, are you?"

"I were twelve then, an' 'twas two years ago."

"And you're fourteen."

"Fourteen this month."

"And fourteen inches taller?"

A huge sigh broke from Stephen's breast:

"Nobbut five an' a quarter, sir."

"Can you give me a reason," asked Mr. James, "why I should take you, Braby?"

Stephen squeezed his cap in his big red hands, and drew a deep breath and said:

"Th' reason that I be a family-man, please, even though I mayn't look it."

Faggis was heard to slap his leg. Old Buckley snorted with laughter and whisked out his red silk handkerchief to mask a pretended sneeze. James remained grave and smileless, looking in the freckled countenance. Perhaps saying in his secret heart: "I wish I had a boy like this!"

"And how many are you in family?" he asked.

"There's mother an' me, an' th' baby. An' mother don't earn as much as she did, an' I'm out of a job jus' now."

"That will do for the present then," said the tall thin man with kindness. "Now go and stroll round the Market, lad, while I talk with your good friends."

"Yessir!" said Stephen, radiant and red.

"Come back in ten minutes," said Buckley. "Or you had better make it a quarter of an hour."

"Yessir!" Stephen knuckled his hair and was gone like a shot from a catapult, to encounter a vision that took away his breath, and set his heart thumping in his breast.

II

None other than Lou Buckley, but Lou so wonderfully altered. The fairy child who had given him the rose grown into a young Princess. With the child's innocence in her radiant eyes, though the child's soft curling ringlets were plaited in long thick tresses such as half-grown school-girls wore.

She was not dressed in white as of old, but in soft blue cloth, fur-bordered. The fur was of a golden-brown, very nearly the colour of her hair. And on her curls was a velvet cap with a cluster of crimson berries, and a long bronze feather that might have dropped from an arch-angel's wing.

"Miss Lou!"

Oh anguish!—she was passing by, just as though he had been a stranger, talking to her companion, a tall bare-headed boy. Older than Stephen, with bright dark eyes that turned to Lou admiringly, and a shining sweep of dark, smooth hair brushed over his broad white brow.

"Miss Lou!" gasped Stephen helplessly. He wheeled but could not follow. The cry of his heart reached her, perhaps. Her bright young face looked round. . . .

And then she was coming with her light quick steps back over the littered cobblestones, and Stephen was so mortal glad that he hadn't a word to say.

"I know you, don't I?" The child's sweet voice, but stronger, firmer, fuller. "You came here once, two years ago, when you weren't so big and tall. And I gave you a rose from my birthday tree——"

"Yes, Miss, an' some one stole her. Got me off me guard an' swiped her, like," said Stephen, finding his tongue. "But if I'd had a chance to fight for her, they'd ha' killed me before they got her!"

"Then I'm glad you didn't get a chance," said Miss Lou in her womanly way. "And how is your mother, Stephen?—you see I haven't forgotten. . . ."

"She's bobbish, thankee," returned Stephen, "an' the baby's bobbish too."

He would have preferred to say 'quite well,' but the

words were slow in coming. Still, the bobbishness of his family drew a merry laugh from Lou. And a supercilious, jeering laugh from her good-looking companion, whose composure and assurance were remarkable indeed.

Though he carried on his back the queerest clothes that Stephen had ever gaped at out of a booth at Marnet Fair, or a Circus Rider's Show.

This boy wore a dark blue woollen gown, buttoned to the neck with metal buttons, and girt about the hips below the waist with a worn red leather strap. Instead of being damp with conscious shame, and shrinking from observation, he held up his chin as though to display the clerical lappets at his throat. More than this, he carried a hand in a pocket of his blue knee-breeches, as though bright yellow stockings (ha ha!) were things to show, not hide. And he turned out his square-toed, low-cut shoes with preposterous assurance, as though he knew himself enviable and not a thing to scorn.

"If I'd had th' luck to ha' met yon chap nigh Tolley-mead," reflected Stephen, "I'd ha' took an' heaved a clod or two at they there petticoats o' his'n!" And he permitted himself to indulge in the belittling reflection that while Big Tit wore a light blue coat and sported a canary-coloured waistcoat, the sensible bird stopped short at these, and ended in neat black stockings, unlike this youth, whom then and there he dubbed Young Yellow Legs. . . .

Yellow Legs. The very name to accompany the clod, reflected Stephen; and a grin widened his mouth at the thought, a slow, deliberate grin. . . . Before it had time to fade away, and it took time in fading, the bright dark eyes of the oddly-dressed boy fixed it with a threatening stare. He said in his clear and pleasant voice, addressing the words to Stephen:

"Look here, you chap. Is there anything you'd like to say to me?"

"Oh, no, Mr. Fred!" said Lou's soft voice. "I shouldn't think there was anything. Are you going home now, Stephen?"

"Please no, Miss Lou, not yet. For Mr. James Buckley he wants a boy," said Stephen, panting with excitement,

“an’ I’m to know in a quarter of an hour whether I’m like to suit.”

“I hope you will, Stephen Braby. Good-bye.” She nodded gaily.

“Good-bye, Miss Lou!”

Oh, how he hoped it would not be good-bye for long! As she nodded again and turned away, taking the sunlight with her, the intrusive image of Yellow Legs faded from Stephen’s mind.

True, as he stood, following her with his eyes, those legs kept pace beside her. But he had seen her once again, and she had remembered him! He looked at the clock on St. Paul’s Church, and found that eleven minutes were still to spend in banishment ere he might learn his fate.

Soon he found himself in a quiet backwater of the great seething Market, under an angle of the Piazza, at the mouth of a quiet street. Two giant drays piled high with crates walled off the roar and racket, and a wall of sooty stuccoed brick rose forbiddingly upon the other hand.

“I say!” An active figure dodged under a lowered dray-tail, and Yellow Legs, with a bright-hard stare, met Stephen’s eyes again. “I saw you hook it and followed you,” said the pleasant voice, deliberately. “Do you twig why?”

“I don’t,” said Stephen, “nor I dunno as I wants.”

“Whether you want to know or not,” said Yellow Legs, “I’m going to tell you!” He thrust both hands as deep as they would go into the pockets of his buckled knee-breeches, revealing that the lining of his queer blue gown matched the yellow hose in hue; and went on with his red mouth curling and his bright dark eyes challenging: “Because though you funked saying it just now, you *had* got something to say.”

“What about?” growled Stephen sulkily.

“About my clothes,” said the Bluecoat. “And we chaps of Christ’s make it a rule to thrash cads who cheek us. See?”

“Ye do, does ye?” Stephen drawled.

“We do. Twig these?” He unpocketed a hand and twiddled his clerical lappets, then tucked up his gown and

performed a pirouette on the oozy paving-stones: "And this?" He secured the skirts of his gown swiftly under his waist-strap, and leap-frogged over a row of iron posts planted along the kerb. . . . "And this, and this, and this, and this!" He repeated the achievement. "Now what do you think of 'em? Don't be too shy to say!"

"I thinks," said Stephen, as Yellow Legs stood menacingly facing him, his shoulders squared, his chin tucked down, his dark eyes well alight, "I thinks, though I seen some wenches once, dressed somethin' someways like ye—I never clapped me eyes on a boy in blue-an'-yellow petticoats afore. And I says to myself——"

"Get on with it!"

"You're in a hurry, bain't you?" A sluggish thorn of anger was rankling in Stephen's mind. "I says to myself, 'this here young wag be bound to belong to th' Show-folk——'"

"You said that, did you, Hayseed?"

"That's what I said, young Yellow Legs!"

As the epithet left Stephen's lips, bright candles flashed before him, and a set of hard young knuckles hit him painfully on the nose. . . .

"Hit back! You've had the coward's blow!" he heard the other saying, as he answered, sniffing back the blood that trickled down his upper lip.

"Coward yerself! Put up yer dooks, young Yellow Legs, if you wants a hammering."

And heard, through the singing in his ears, the Bluecoat cry:

"Come on!"

12

In less time than it takes to write the line, the quiet backwater was crowded with amateurs of pugilism desirous of seeing a fight. Vanmen and carmen, still masticating the last mouthful of breakfast, with a haggler or so who for sport's sake was content to sacrifice business, an aproned stable-helper and some nondescript Market-loafers, had gravitated to the corner sheltered by the barrier of cabbage-crates.

"Pitch in an' give it 'im, my boy!" said a burly, blue-eyed drayman, patting Stephen heavily on the back with a hand like a bacon-flitch. "Land 'im a rattler in the dice-box for that corker he fetched you on the smeller. Off wi' yer coat an' let me git a bit of a feel at yer muscle!" He padded and pinched Stephen's upper arm knowingly and added: "Dunno as I'd mind backin' you to beat, to the tune of a couple o' quarterns, supposin' any genelman present 'ud like to take the bet?"

"Done with you, Bob!" A blue-chinned man in a shaggy cap and greatcoat smote Stephen's champion on the back with an exceedingly unwashed hand. "Though the lush is as good as inside of me, my fancy bein' a Nailer. 'Cos w'y? they're always fightin', them young Bluecoats from Crisospittle, an' when they ain't they're lookin' abart for some fresh chap to fight. Reg'ler young Bengal tigers, that's the name I calls 'em."

"You'd 'ave to fight yourself, Joe Baines, if so be you 'ad to wear such cloes. Braybrooke, this feller's name is," said a stableman, defensively, "Grandson to Mr. Braybrooke of the Royal 'Portico' Hotel. Spends 'is 'olidays with 'is grandad reg'ler—an' the Market knows it! Why, that chap'll 'ave 'arf a dozen mills in a day wi' young waggons an' carmen and porters; an' go 'ome to 'is grub at 'is grandfather's as mild as a dish of milk."

"And there's nothink milder than that is!" said the burly, blue-eyed drayman.

"Not than the London article, there ain't," confirmed the stableman. "Hark at him cussin' an' swearin'!" he added with admiration. "Ain't he a lovely specimen of a reg'lar model boy!"

For Bluecoat was vigorously resisting attempts to relieve him of his long-tailed upper garment.

"Leave me alone, you meddling fools!" Stephen heard him angrily exclaim. "We chaps never strip for a mill with a cad. Now, Hayseed, are you ready?"

And Stephen, peeled to his trousers and shirt, was facing the bright dark eyes. As he braced himself behind his guard, mindful of Malvina's teaching, knowing his opponent's longer reach a source of peril to himself, and grin-

ning faces ringed about, and the shuffle and scrape of iron-nailed boots sounded on the slushy pavement, a curious shudder ran through him from his scalp down the middle of his back. . . .

For over the heads of the jostling crowd looked the strange pale eyes of Mackilliveray . . . Mackilliveray, as Stephen had seen him under the gas-lamp at King's Cross. An instant, and the red-haired man with the bulldog face had vanished. . . . Stephen met the Bluecoat's confident smile as, toe to toe, they squared.

And then the shuddering gave place to a tingling joy in battle. He was Bluecoat's master, despite the feints and sparrings of that confident youth. . . . Stephen would never, he felt assured, be obliged to summon to his aid the choicest of Malvina's secrets; the leads, counters and cross-counters, the upper-cuts, jolts and twisty ones, by which she set such store.

There would never be a chance to crown a really scientific hammering, with Casgey's Feint, and Swaffham, for a proper finish up.

There would—A blow on the side of the jaw rattled among Stephen's sound white teeth, and jarred down Stephen's backbone, raising a laugh and painting a grin on the crowding faces round. And the man in the shaggy greatcoat was calling time. . . . The first round was over, and the drayman was dabbing a rank wet sponge across Stephen's mouth and nose.

"It'll stop the bleedin', that's that it will!" said the philanthropic sponge-wielder, as he dropped the sponge in the water-pail, which had come from a cab-stand near. "Pluck up an' don't make me sorry as wot I've been an' backed you!"

"You lea' me be!" growled Stephen, returning to the fray. . . . Yellow Legs was pretty sure to try another jaw-hook. Well, Casgey's Feint had been invented to bring hook-hitters to shame. You lured your man to try it again,—you took one short step backwards. . . . He swung round with the drive of his own blow, and then you Swaffhamed him. . . .

And that is how it came about. Flushed with the certainty of victory, Yellow Legs tried the hook again with all his strength behind. And at the proper moment Stephen stepped smartly backwards. His adversary twisted like a dipping top—Stephen let out with Swaffham—and Yellow Legs, gyrating twice, sat down on the slimy stones.

“Time’s up!” cried Stephen’s backer, as the man in the shaggy greatcoat made play with the clanking stable-pail and the horsey-smelling sponge. But Yellow Legs was sick and limp, and white as his clerical lappets, with a right eye badly swollen and closed, and a pain under the left short ribs. . . .

“Tell that chap he’s got the best of me! Pull me up on my legs, some of you!” he sputtered, making right-armed passes in the air indicative of his willingness to shake hands.

“I hope I haven’t hurt ye bad,” said Stephen, as their palms encountered.

“Not much. I say, but you can box!” returned Bluecoat, feeling his ear.

“I knowed as much when I see him!” asserted Stephen’s drayman.

“I wish *I* ’ad,” growled the shaggy man, clinking some coins in his hand. “’Ark ’ere, Young Tommy Sayers,” he went on, as Stephen, getting into his jacket again, looked at him in astonishment. “‘Casgey’s Feint’ both far and wide is pop’lar with the Fancy. But Swaffham atop, for the knock-out, was Casgey’s Patent, see? Kep’ to hisself, the knack of it, not showed to pals an’ patrons. Now puttin’ the question plump an’ plain, ’oo gev’ the tip to you?”

“Tip, sir?” asked Stephen, timidly, for curious eyes were on him, and the shaggy man, breathing onions and rum, kept coming unpleasantly near.

“Ah! You’re awake, my codger,” rallied the shaggy one, winking. “Come, out with it! Who taught of you to use your mauleys? Eh?”

“My mother, sir,” said Stephen.

“Carry me ’ome!” gasped the shaggy man as the bystanders broke into a roar. Only Bluecoat blackened and scowled,

as Stephen, scarlet to the hair, stood ringed with hilarious faces, whose crinkled eyes wept tears of mirth and whose mouths stretched from ear to ear.

“Now then, what’s all this? . . . Fighting again in the Market?”

The gruff voice of a Bow Street constable scattered the snickering crowd. And Stephen, pierced by the horrible thought that Mr. James Buckley must be waiting,—dived through its jostling elements, and ran for his very life.

13

“Which, when the quarter-hour goes and no Shaver don’t answer to ’is number, you might ’ave floored me,” said B. Faggis, “with a stick o’ salary. My Missus puts her ’and to ’er ’eart an’ says: ‘He’s bin run over!’ an’ Mr. James he shakes his ’ead an’ goes off wiv’ ’is yennum to the knab.”

“Say ‘’is money to the Bank’ an’ adone with it,” rebuked Mrs. Faggis sternly, “instead o’ tippin’ that low back-talk whenever you open your mouth. How do you know as Mr. James won’t say as ’ow your bad example has to do with the boy comin’ back so late, in a perfect mask of gore? Don’t let him tell me it wasn’t his fault! He’d ought to ha’ knowed better, with as grand a woman for his mother as he’s got, and that blessed baby at ’ome. . . .” And Mrs. Faggis, forgetful of her clothes, and wrought upon by her feelings, subsided on an empty crate and dissolved in a flood of tears.

“Come, come! What’s all this fuss about?” said the wheezy voice of Mr. Buckley, returning from a waddle round the Market, with his granddaughter tripping at his side. “Don’t be frightened, Pretty!” Lou having cried out at the ensanguined countenance of Stephen. “The boy’s been fighting. Haven’t you, you young dog? Don’t dare to lie to me!”

“He didn’t lie, Gramp,” cried Lou, distressed. “He hasn’t even spoken.”

“Well, let him speak!” cried the stout old man, “if he’s anything to say for himself!”

“I didn’t go to do it, sir,” cried Stephen in desperation,

for Mr. James with his wallet in his hand had now returned from the Bank, and Groggard, with a hammer and a mouthful of brads had added himself to the audience, "but for the young gentleman a-follering me up, and arsking me what I thought of his toggery? an' me a-sayin' Show Folk wore such, an' givin' him the name o' Yellow Legs and him a-landin' me a hit on the nose, 'twouldn't ha' happened at all."

"What's this about clothes? . . . Let nobody tell *me*," said old Mr. Buckley sternly, "that young Ted Braybrooke from the 'Portico' Hotel isn't at the bottom of this! He squires my girl to Maiden Lane and brings her back to the Market——"

"He was very kind, dear Gramp," pleaded Lou, "and took great care of me!"

"And then," puffed the vexed old gentleman, "he goes off to pick a quarrel—as his Blustering, Bullying habit is,—and lights on this unfortunate boy. Strikes him in the face, forces him to fight, and beats him to a jelly!"

"Please, sir——" exploded Stephen, unable to bear the pity in Lou's brown eyes.

"Beats him to a jelly," obstinately pursued the irascible old gentleman. "And what I say is, that the Police should put an end to this!"

"Please, sir, he didn't beat me! . . . 'Twas t'other way about!" protested Stephen.

"Come, now, stow that!" growled Groggard. "You've been warned about lyin', you know."

"You're tellin' the truth, I'd like to think, young Shaver," whispered Faggis. "But if you ain't——"

"But if you're not," cried Mrs. Faggis. "Stop! . . . For your mother's sake, an' the darling babe's! Before you're struck by lightnin', as happened to my Great Aunt Gann's third sister's youngest son. . . ."

"Come, come," said kind James Buckley, "give the boy a chance to answer. How did you fare with Braybrooke, lad? . . . That's what I want to know."

"He bled me nose 'fore the first round, sir," asserted Stephen, stoutly, "an' he caught me a nasty crack on the chin, but he never beat me at all. . . . I beat *him*, sir,—I

did indeed! The Market men 'ud tell you! Wi' Casgey's Feint in the second round, an' Swaffham to finish off."

"S'welp you, Bob?" cried the hawker, rubbing his hands delightedly.

"I believe him," said James Buckley, "if none of you others do."

"It's true," said Groggard, who had stepped aside to speak to one of the costers. "Cholley, the drayman, backed him and won four pots o' porter. An' they asks, 'Who taught you boxing?' An' what do you think he says?" . . .

Stephen, the focus of many eyes, twisted his cap and wriggled. . . .

"Who did you tell them taught you, boy?" said the voice of Mr. James.

"I—I'll tell if I may whisper, sir," faltered Stephen, blushing scarlet.

"Whisper, then," said the tall, thin man. "We won't let anybody hear. . . ."

And Stephen, drawing a long deep breath and screwing his mouth into a button, breathed into the large fatherly ear under the tufts of thin brown hair:

"My mother, sir . . . As used to live . . . With a lady married to a perfeshnal . . . Casgey by name as used to win. . . . Purses put up at Fairs."

"I understand! Indeed, I had had a hint of it from your friend Faggis. . . . And you do your teacher credit," returned Buckley in an undertone. He patted Stephen on the shoulder, and straightened his tall, thin body. "Now cut away and wash your face," said the voice that Stephen loved. "I have had my talk with Faggis, and you and your mother and the baby are welcome at the Nurseries, Sidcup, as soon as you can come. . . . Monday if you like." Buckley went on, "The cottage is next to Groggard's, and clean as a new beehive, you may trust Mrs. G. for that. What furniture you're like to want, Faggis is going to lend you. You'll have eight shillings a week to start as a boy about the houses: Mrs. Braby's wage will be eighteen, with a chance to make it more."

"Hooroar!" yelled Stephen at the top of his voice.

"And put these five shillings in your pocket," said Buck-

ley Senior, thrusting two plump half-crowns into the boy's hand. "One is for taking Braybrooke down, which he wanted pretty badly, and the other 'cause I called you a liar, when you're nothing of the sort. You're a tough young sapling of British oak, that's what you are, young Braby. Give him a shake o' the hand, my pet. He belongs to the Nurseries now!" And as Lou laughingly obeyed: "Now, Jemmy! Breakfast—breakfast!" cried the stout, lively, kind old man, and whisked them both away.

"An' tip us your fist, young 'un," said Groggard, with surly kindness, "being one of us now, as the Governor said. Tell your mother she can count on my wife. With Mrs. Groggard for a neighbour she won't go far for com'ny."

"Th-thank you, sir!" gasped Stephen, dizzy with all this joy.

"An' give the Missus a kiss, Shaver," cried the hawker, slapping Stephen on the shoulder, "as nothin' but 'er good old 'art made 'er come down on you jest now! Another on the other side," he urged as blushing Stephen gingerly pecked the wholesome cheek Mrs. Faggis tendered for the salute. "Which bein' done, an' that there blood sluiced off yer dial, Shaver, we'll see if that Bluecoat bloke 'as left you dominoes enough to chew."

Whereupon, Groggard obliging with a towel and a bowl of water, Mrs. Faggis's deft and motherly hands cleansed Stephen of the tokens of the fray. And then, as the hawker repeatedly affirmed that the 'Before and After' in Bow Street was the only chop-house in the Market where 'a proper tightener' could be had, Mrs. Faggis, shaking out her skirts and straightening her bonnet, accompanied her husband and their youthful friend to this lauded house of call.

Its narrow swing-doors, adorned without by concave metal mirrors (in which entering clients beheld themselves reflected as abnormally lean), and furnished within by others that enlarged the proportions of departing customers (after a fashion suggestive of the expanding nature of the fare), neighboured those of an equally famous public-house at the Russell Street end of Bow Street, whose ale and porter carried down the food consumed within. And the

size of its sausages, chump-chops and steaks, Finnan haddocks and baked potatoes, had, as B. Faggis feelingly observed, 'to be felt to be believed.'

The place, with its rows of tables, and narrow backless benches, and its huge spittoons making islands in the sawdust covering the floor, was full of Market people, all eating, talking, and smoking; and, though crowded, noisy, and odorous, seemed to Stephen a luxurious resort.

The stimulating influence of a huge chump-chop, crowned with two sizzling sausages, washed down with coffee, hot and strong, and followed by a wedge of apple pie, emboldened him to laugh and talk more freely than his wont was, and ere long he had embarked on a full account of the battle with the Bluecoat boy.

This ended, amidst the comments of his hearty host and hostess, it was the turn of Faggis to take the conversational floor, and he favoured Stephen with instances in his personal experience, of youths who had entered Nurseries at five shillings a week and up'ards, and ended in a blaze of effluence as Growers on their own Grounds.

"But don't ye set your mind too much on Money," warned Mrs. Faggis, "nor yet on Land, but be content wi' what good may come your way. And forget some silly things I may ha' said, about its being a 'ardship for a boy who's got gentlefolks' blood in his veins not to study wi' gentlemen's sons."

"Who cares about learning with gentlemen's sons!" cried Stephen, flushed and radiant. "I can be a Grower for the Market, and a gentleman just the same. An' I'll grow such roses as never you saw, an' I'll win Prizes an' Prizes. . . . And the very best rose of all of 'em shall have 'Miss Lou' for a name."

"You're bounceable enough to breed Prize Bullocks for the Show," said Faggis, "an' between you an' me an' the Missus, I lays as you'll grow that Rose an' many another, too! Have no cove showed you Whittin'ton's Stone at the bottom of the Hill at 'Ighgate? Not the Harchway, but the Old North Road? 'Turn again, Stephenson, Grower of Roses!' That's what the bloomin' Bow Bells might one day be a-ringing for you!"

"Whittin'ton 'twas," smiled Mrs. Faggis, "as married on his master's daughter. Leastways that's 'ow my Great Aunt Gann used to spin the tale to me. . . ."

"An' I will too! . . . I tell 'e as I will! I've made my mind up to it!" Stephen thumped the table with his fist, and his eyes glowed like hot coals.

"What will you do, my deary?" said Mrs. Faggis admiringly.

"Don't smash the 'ome up, Shaver!" said Faggis, winking over his porter-pot. "Ullo! Does that lucifer-match-headed bloke 'appen to be a pal o' yours? There by the door. Beck'nin' an' makin' signs. It's a face I seen at Tolleymead. An' if 'twasn't much good to your father, it'll be none to your mother's son."

And Stephen, painfully craning his neck in the indicated direction, saw over rows of strangers' heads, all eating and talking as they ate, the bulldog jowl and the prominent stare of the red-haired Mackilliveray, and blundered up as he beckoned 'Come out' and squeezed his way to the door.

It had been real, the figure under the gas in the bustle of King's Cross Station, nor when Stephen had stood up stripped to fight, had a dream-face mingled with the crowd. The man was there in his moleskin clothes, with his dreadnought coat, and bundles; and the shovel and pick he had carried with him on that journey of years before. . . .

Now he said in the slow, thick, heavy voice with the well-known burr of the West Midlands:

"I've a message fur ye, young narbor"—he was much less florid than usual, and the whites of his queer pale staring eyes were no longer veined with red—"to take wi' ye back to Tolleymead. I've follered ye t' gie it, aw th' way fro' King's Cross Station wheer I'd gone to train fur the North. Wools't take it?"

"Ay!" Stephen nodded.

"Yo'll mind o' th' other message? How the man as hung round th' cowyard gate were goin' fur good an' all. . . . Eh, narbor? Though he broke of his word an' come back again," said Mackilliveray, "like a domned blaggard! . . . Tell yer mother as I says yon man is sorry for what he done!"

"I'll tell her."

"Thankee, narbor!" He did not rumble in the throat with secret laughter now. "An' tell her, wi' respects to words she spoke as cannawt be forgotten,—as I'd gi' my blood to ha' been th' man as said nowt, an' went away!"

"'And went away. . . . I won't forget. . . . May I go now, sir?" asked Stephen.

"Theer's a bit more, young narbor, with respects to the man as stayed. The man 'as done your mother harm by writin' onsigned letters—the man 'as made a dubous use o' the brass as had come his way. Tell yo'r mother I reckons to cure yon man o' follerin' an' honest woman. As I've got my grip on his win'pipe hard,—an' shannot lowse it agen! Yo'll none forgit? . . ."

"I won't forget."

"Says yo' onto yo'r mother,—'Mackilliveray ha' swore 'fore the Face o' God t' master yon man or dee!'"

The crushing weight of the powerful hand was lifted from Stephen's shoulder. The burly figure in its navy's dress swung round and tramped away. He held his red-haired head erect, and squared his heavy shoulders, and carried himself like a man resolved to keep the vow he had made.

I4

When the latch of the garden-gate clicked back and Stephen came up the pathway, a bright fire burned in the keeping-room, and his mother moved busily about.

Newly washed garments hung on a line, drying in the heat of the fire. Cupboards stood open and drawers were pulled out, there was litter of packing on the floor.

There was something agog, and the conviction of this would have stimulated the boy's curiosity. But not at this moment. It was stamped on his face that Stephen had something to tell. . . .

His blue eyes shone like jewels. His fresh round cheeks were crimson. He breathed quickly, as though he had been running, and his mouth kept on widening with smiles. . . .

"Yo're lackin' fur wind," said Malvina in her grave ma-

ternal accents, as he kissed her, smiling and panting, and hung his cloth cap on the peg.

"I were late," he said, "an' I run for it,—knowin' as you'd be waitin'. . . . Mother, I've something to tell you."

She stopped him by holding up her hand:

"Yo'll tell yo'r tale when I've told yo' mine," she said with the regal gesture that her shadow turned to mimicry on the whitewashed wall behind. "I be a-flittin' out o' here."

"'Flittin'! Now, that be a belter!"

"Dunna say as yo'r mother be lyin'."

"Why, didn't you mean it jokin' like?"

"'Tis th' Lord's own truth!" she said.

"Where be we goin', mother?" he asked, his bright blue eyes dilated, and joy and something like dismay striving together in his face.

"Where but to Faggis," she said with a sigh, "till us can git a biding."

Stephen swung his arm above his head and laughed in sheer delight.

"Then listen. . . . I've the offer of a young lad's job in Mr. Buckley's nurseries. An' says Buckley, if my mother 'ud be willin' to come, he'd find her work to do. Eighteen shillin' to week for you, wi' th' use of half a cottage, if you'd cook and clean for two or three men—an' eight shillin' for me! 'An' if you'd like to start to-once,' says he, 'come up o' Monday.' An' Faggis'll put in furniture to set you up in the house."

"'Tis the Hand o' th' Lord," said Malvina, with awe, "as helpeth them as trusts Him. Long ha' I dwelled wi' my husband and my babes in this house as were my home. . . . Now th' silver cord of love be loosed and the bowl of wedlock broken, so I'll take my bundle and my staff and marry my foot to th' road. The litlin' fares along wi' me, as cannawt do wi'out her mother. But 'tis fur yo' to pick betwixt the Market job and the life of a rich man's son. . . . Yo'r father sends yo' word to choose. Look me i' th' face," said Malvina. "The hard-got penny or the heavy purse? . . . Which shall it be, my man?"

He leaped to her and hugged her round the neck.

“The Market and my mother!”

“I’d ha’ put my mother first if I’d been yo’,” she said as she returned the embrace. “Sit down an’ take yo’r supper now,” she bade, and set a meal before him, the lavish sumptuousness of which took Stephen’s breath away.

“Meat an’ taters an’ dumplin’ on Saturday night! By jings!” he cried in wonder, as she heaped his plate and bade him haste, for she had work to do. “Ironin’, I’ll lay.” He wagged his head at the garments pendent from the clothes-line. She nodded assent, setting her firm lips over the anguish eating at her heart.

“Ironin’, an’ some orra things. . . . Nay, no! I’ve had my supper. But don’t fare to bolt th’ meat like that. Chamble it proper, do.”

To ‘chamble’ meant to masticate, in her West Midland dialect. When he had finished she took his hand and led him to the cradle-side.

“Kneel down an’ promise,” her voice was stern, “as yo’ll be good to the litlin’. Boy an’ man, as long as th’ Lord’ll let yo’ dwell on th’ earth!”

“I promise, mother,” he whispered back, awed by her solemn manner.

“Before the Face o’ your Father in Heaven. Say th’ words after me.”

He repeated the words in a mumbling way.

“Say ‘Amen!’ ”

“Amen!”

“An’ yo’ll remember?”

He nodded assent. Her powerful hand released him, and he rose up.

“Now yo’ll get to bed,” she bade him, “for we’ll take th’ road o’ Monday while Tolleymead be routin’ in th’ blankets, an’ I’ll need to ha’ th’ place to myseln. For I’ll ha’ no temptin’ Providence by cleanin’ house o’ Sunday, an’ if I dunna do it now it wunna be fitty when we go.”

“*When we go. . . . We are going. . . . On Monday—on Monday!*” The words were running in Stephen’s ears like the burden of a pleasant song. He fell asleep to the sound of them, despite the household noises—the opening and shutting of cupboards and drawers, the swish of the

broom and the clank of the pail and the thud of the iron on the board.

But in his mother's ears as she worked, her spoken words were ringing:

"The silver cord of love be loosed and the bowl of wedlock broken. . . ." Could love be Love that died of even a mortal wound like hers?

And One had said: 'Whom God hath joined let not man put asunder. . . .' Ay, but the man had lightly broken the oath he had sworn to her. . . .

Oh, at what cost she must keep her vow never to touch the money! For years to come, unless Death were a friend, she must lie on the bed she had made.

Tramp in the mud while Braby rode by, sober, well dressed and handsome. Even as her dazed and wondering eyes had seen him some hours before. . . .

Could he have known how she felt when he stood, such a different man, in the doorway! Could he have dreamed how her heart had thrilled back to the passionate love of her youth!

Could he have dreamed of the torture she knew at the thought of her place at his table—her post at the head of his household given to his sister's illegitimate child!

Would he have cared, or mocked at her? He had spoken of her duty. It was terrible to know that perhaps he had right upon his side.

She felt torn in two between Malvina his wife, whom God had made one flesh with him, and that other Malvina, who pined to be free of the home he had made a prison.

. . . In her eyes her Duty took shape as a hag who stood in the chimney-corner, narrow and meagre, pointing the way with a bony, wrinkled hand. Rebellion rose in her breast as she worked with her pail and mop and scrubbing-brush. . . . He had broken his word. He had cast her off. She was free for ever of his bonds! She clanked with her pail and she trundled her mop in the face of the hag by the hearth-side. And she sang as she had not sung since the boy in the attic was a suckling babe.

'Over the hills and far away' was the beginning and end

of the ballad. But the hag in the corner beside the hearth never lowered her pointing finger. Presently it would be Duty's turn. She can always bide her time.

15

They spent Sunday together quietly and took a walk after dinner. It led them to the churchyard where Malvina's babies lay. They would be lonely when their mother had gone. . . . It seemed treachery to leave their little bodies—though the innocent souls were safe in Heaven—in their beds of oozy clay. But the living two had the stronger claim on the love and service of their mother. Her yellow-haired lad and her black-eyed maid were all to Malvina now.

She slept heavily on Sunday night, though Stephen lay wakeful in the attic. When the day-brow lifted and the eastern sky was banded with primrose yellow, and the blackbird whistled his *réveillé*, they had eaten their Passover meal. All the crumbs and fragments they had to spare they scattered on the window-sills and doorstep, in parting tribute to the numerous birds that the coppice and orchard owned.

The thrushes and blackbirds, the robins and tits, that Malvina had loved and befriended. Would their songs be as sweet and their plumage as brave, Stephen wondered, when his mother had gone?

Would they, too, fly away when the cottage remained silent and locked and empty? Would some evil befall these innocent things, and what of the old grey fox?

There were cubs in the earth in the coppice at the bottom of the garden. October had passed without peril to these, but what of the days to come? Stephen asked the question in his heart, but was wiser than to put it to Malvina, as he climbed to the top of the rearward porch and set there an old tin can.

This relic, superannuated, but purposely kept bright, was the signal employed in emergency. When from his sleeping-loft under the thatch, John Pover, narrowing his long-

sighted eyes, caught sight of the battered milk-can, he would plod, with the footsteps of a faithful friend, to Malvina Braby's door.

Stephen always stoned down the old tin can from the porch when no longer wanted. Hence the many dints in its bulging sides and the hole that the light shone through. He whistled now as he set it up, though it meant good-bye to John Pover, and the sturdy, faithful friendship that had stood the test of years.

Oh! the rapture of seeing at last, the narrow horizon widening. . . . The huge world opening before one's eyes with the promise of things that were new. . . . Work in a market-garden ground in the pay of Lou Buckley's father!—the tall grey man with the smiling eyes and the haggard, friendly face. . . . Stephen would have chosen such a career above any that Fortune might offer. Little appeal there was in the thought of being a rich man's son!

For his heart was brimful of the innocent hope of seeing the child he worshipped; of living near Lou in a garden of flowers that should blossom the whole year round.

How little they know us who love us best! Would Malvina have thought it of Stephen, that the child he had barely mentioned to her was the core of his secret heart? That since the day she had given him the rose, he had fostered, waking and sleeping, that sweet, impossible, exquisite dream of an Eden shared with Lou.

They waited,—Pover did not come. He lay groaning abed that morning in the iron grip of the first attack of his winter rheumatism. And Mrs. Pover—fighting the foe with liniment and hot flannels—had forgotten to glance from the window, as the ritual ordained she should do.

"John bain't comin'. Belikely, 'tis all for the best," said Malvina, and shut down the windows. Her lips were close-set as she locked the back-door with its ponderous, seldom-used key. For to go without bidding the Povers farewell was a sin against Friendship and Gratitude. Unnatural, heartless, cold-blooded, unkind, were the epithets deserved by the act.

Her merciless code left no chink of escape. She was

judged and condemned by her conscience, as she cast a last glance round the walls of the home she was leaving for ever to-day.

A letter written by Stephen's hand in large, round, boyish characters, and signed by his mother, was headed 'To the Landlord.' This was the gist of the scrawl. . . . The house was given up from date, no longer being wanted by the tenant. The quarter's rent that might be claimed in lieu of longer notice, would be sent by his obediently, "Malvina Calderwood."

Then Malvina took the hammer and a nail from the drawer of the old kitchen-table and nailed the letter to the table with a stroke that buried the nail-head in the wood. And the act seemed the snapping of the final link of her chain of wedded bondage; the straggling letters of her maiden name made her think of her marriage-day.

She was no richer now than she had been when she mated with the grazier's foreman. The little hair-trunk with the dimmed brass nails held all she owned in the world. The Bible and *Pilgrim's Progress*, the cup with the wedding couple, and the plate with the bright pink rose on it, went into the little hair-trunk. The moth-eaten patches on its top and sides were the baldness of faithful service. Like the other things, it had been a gift from the woman who had been her friend.

Two bundles and the little hair-trunk held all the possessions of the travellers. Their clothes, and such food and household stores as remained, they took with them.

But nothing that in the remotest sense might be counted as Braby's property. Even the book about Sea Rovers and the *Robinson Crusoe* were left.

* * * * *

They had plotted to catch the Monday morning train that left the junction at New Marnet for King's Cross Station at 6 a.m., stopping at Sowgate at 6.10.

Stephen grinned as he pictured the ploughman's dismay when the fact of their flight was made clear to him. . . . He imagined him stumping up the garden-path in his clumping iron-toed boots. He could see the leathern ridges

of surprise into which he would wrinkle his forehead. How his eyes would round in astonishment and his mouth take the shape of a whistle when he found that the nest was empty—Malvina and her fledglings flown.

Stephen was grinning still as he locked the frontward door of the cottage with the heavy old key that might have belonged to a Church or a Town Hall.

“Hide th’ key in th’ hole that goes under th’ step,” said Malvina, and there he hid it. John Pover would know where to look for the key, when at the last he came. . . .

Stephen was still chuckling at the picture in his mind when he bowed his sturdy shoulders to the weight of the little old brass-nailed hair-trunk it fell to his lot to bear. His mother carried the baby, her basket and both the bundles, as she led the way down the garden-path and paused at the garden gate. . . .

The spiders had spun over the gate in the night, and dew-drops hung thick on the cobwebs. She must break through the glittering barrier before she could open the gate. . . . She sighed at the ruthlessness of the act, as the gate swung backwards on its hinges, and a delicate shower of diamond drops were scattered on the bricks of the path.

She passed through, and Stephen followed. As the gate clashed to after him a curious shock went through her. She wavered, but would not look round. She went forward resolutely to the five-barred gate that led from the road to the wheatacres. She opened it—and then they were on the road, their faces turned to the north. Where Tolley-mead Lane crossed the Tolley Brook Road they would take the eastward turning that led to the station of the long white gates where Stephen had waited for Death.

Little thought Stephen of Death to-day, as he trudged after the stately figure that moved on with its vigorous upright grace, under the burden it bore.

Over her faded lavender print gown was a shawl of rough grey woollen. She had drawn it close over her bosom and hips and knotted it gipsy-wise. Thus one hand and arm were free to take the bigger, heavier bundle, and the second bundle she carried in the hand of the arm that supported the child.

Slung in the shawl, cradled by her arm, the little one slept soundly. So Stephen had slumbered many a time, he remembered as he followed now. And the sense of Beauty quickening in the boy found pleasure in the erect and masterful grace of the figure that moved before him, with the old straw bonnet perched over the flow of its wonderful wheat-red hair.

It was one of those perfect, flawless days that are the joy of our English November, the sky of milky-tinged turquoise, the breeze the merest sigh. In the distance over Romney Marshes, the great gold sun was rising from lakes of rose and amber light that flooded south and west.

The air was spiced with burning twitch, and the pleasant smell of wood-smoke, with after-savours of perishing leaves, apples, and blackberries and moss. There was a tang of frost in it that made mere breathing rapture. . . . London air, Malvina thought, would be less sweet than this! The foliage of the elms on Tolleymead Green had turned to rusty amber. Those of Tolley Hall and Braby-cott were barely sered as yet. But the poplars that grew by the Tolley Brook were sheerest, clearest yellow, the colour of new clover-honey, or pure Australian gold.

There were trees in London parks—poor things!—penned within iron railings. Did they never sicken of smoke and grime, and yearn for the country-side? And would ever a London sunrise show such beauty, Malvina wondered, stealing wistful glimpses, as she hastened along, of the splendour in the eastern sky.

But as she looked she heard the sound of busy picks and shovels. . . . Half-way across the wheatacres there was a gap of many feet in the hedge. . . .

The southward boundary was down. The railway gang were working. There were moving figures in moleskins white with chalky Hertfordshire clay. . . . One, taller, bigger, bulkier than the rest, stood on a heap of upcast. She averted her eyes, and quickened her pace; then glanced again and walked slower. The man was not Mackilliveray, the lion in her pathway!

He was lurking somewhere in the neighbourhood. She had not heard the last of him. Eh, the man! with his talk

of the shop, and the home, and the little garden behind! 'Twas the bounden duty of a decent woman to run from such temptation. Thank the Lord! there would be no Mackilliverays at Buckley Brothers' Nurseries, pestering honest women-folk to the very verge of their wits. . . .

"Hurry!" she cried to the boy at her heels, who was staring towards the gangmen. He looked back at her and broke into a trot that brought him to her side.

"That's a big chap there, on th' ballast-heap. Fur the minute I thought 'twas Mackilliveray. But then I saw 'twas a black-haired man, an' I minded as Mackilliveray's gone North."

Her wide brows lowered over her stern grey eyes.

"Who told yo' that?" she queried.

"Mackilliveray an' no one else. I seed him in London," said her boy. "Three times I seed him. Once at King's Cross, an' another time in th' Market, an' again at th' 'Before and After' shop, an' then he spoke to me."

"Hanna' I forbidden yo' to ha' dealin's wi' yon ras-kill?" she demanded.

"Dealin's I'd none," asserted Stephen. "He gave me a message, that's all."

"I wanna hear't!" she told him.

"Reckon you'd best," said Stephen. "Him bein' on his way up North, an' comin' back nummore."

He gave the message, trotting at her side. She heard it out in silence. So the lion was out of her path for good. The Lord had heard her cry. But her road to the wide free world outside the little world of Tolleymead shrank to a sheep-track as she went, and who was standing there?

Duty, the hatchet-featured hag, rose up before Malvina. Her meagre finger pointed back along the homeward road. Eh! how Malvina hated her, the sour-faced old mawther!

"Hurry!" she cried to the boy at her side. "Do yo' want to lose th' train?"

Lose the train. . . . Well, that was a joke! thought Stephen. . . . Did his mother. . . . But how she was walking! With the baby and the bundles, and a basket of apples as well. . . . They were pippins harvested in Octo-

ber from a tree in the little orchard. Stephen's own pockets bulged with the fruit and his mouth was also full.

But for that fact he would have whistled the tune to which he was marching. . . . The tune that the flowers always piped, so old, yet ever new. The tune that will never cease to sound in the ears that are willed to hear it. "Love us, Stephen, and live for us, the life that is best of all! . . ."

* * * * *

How slowly his mother was moving now. . . . Why, she walked like an old, old woman! Her proud head drooped on the column of her neck—her shoulders took a forward bend. Why? . . . The damp earth sucking under the soles of her shoes seemed to do its best to delay her, the hedge-row that caught at the fringe of her shawl seemed begging her not to go. . . .

She looked round. . . . Now she stopped as though waiting for the boy. He came up with her, smiling and panting.

"'Tis what I feared. . . . I mun go back!" What a mask of misery was her face!

"For somewhat you've been an' forgot?" gasped Stephen. "My eye! Then we *will* lose the train!" he thought, and his round face lengthened and his smiling mouth was going to droop at the corners, when a bright idea that occurred to him curled them jovially again.

"Help me down wi' this an' just sit on it. I'll run back in th' inside of a minute. What be th' thing as you found you'd forgot? Tell us now, mother, an' be quick!"

"'Tis what I feared 'ud come to me," said his mother over the baby and the bundles. How old and hunched and worn she looked, and how her great eyes stared. . . .

Her powerful hand had stayed the trunk he would have lowered from his shoulders. . . . But for that it would have seemed to the boy that she spoke to a stranger in him. . . .

"'Tis the word I spoke to yo'r father," she said, "when I telled him I'd stay in the cottage, nobbut he lived like a lord of the land up yonder at Brabycott House. 'Ivera

night,' I said to him, 'th' light shall burn i' th' winda, whether or no it keeps a man from stumblin' out in th' dark.' I vera night! . . . An' what of to-night when the Dark comes down on th' wheatacres? Yo' mun forgi' me, Stevey lad, nobbut I be bound to turn back!"

"Turn back!"

He burst out blubbering and cried, through the hic-coughing sobs that shook him:

"You shan't turn back!"

"I'll be goin' back," said Malvina, "because o' yon promise. . . . But yo' wi' th' money fur th' railway in yo'r pouch—there'll be no goin' back for yo'! Gi' me th' wee trunk under my arm, an' take th' bigger bundle. Theer's nought in that but duds o' yo'r own!" She held it out to him.

"I shan't not take it," blubbered the boy, as the trunk was wrested from him. He let the bundle fall to the ground, and shook a stubborn head.

"Please yo'rseln what yo' do wi' yo'r own," said his mother briefly, and passed him, setting out without more ado on the homeward-leading road.

* * * * *

Stephen blubbered until he could blubber no more. Now he mopped his eyes and went after her, slouching along under the bundle he carried instead of the trunk. He could see his mother moving along, overtopping the brambles of the hedgerow, steeped from the feet to the shoulders in shade, and the rest of her bright in the sun.

Now she passed in at the five-barred gate. He heard it shut behind her. And he followed, still snivelling and mopping his eyes with the cuff of his jacket-sleeve. It had been such a jovial, glorious day, not only for snivelling Stevey. Now the beauty of it seemed darkened and blurred, and the warm, sweet breeze nipped cold.

"Turn again, Stephen-son, grower of roses!" He winced at the mockery of the utterance.

Life had promised such splendid things. And now the promise was broken. Hope had soared high, and now Hope's wings were broken and trailed in the dust. There

would be nothing now but the old dull life, and the same drab toil for 'Stephen, following the wearisome daily round like a squirrel imprisoned in a cage.

When he got home with the bundle, smoke was curling from the cottage chimney. The garden-gate stood on the latch—and the house-door stood ajar. The blinds were up. From within the house came the sound of the kettle boiling, and the rattle of the big old-fashioned key in the lock of the rearward door.

He set down the bundle by the doorstep, and wondered what his mother was doing. When the old tin can tumbled down from its perch with a clatter, he understood. . . .

She came back then through the rearward door, as he waited on the threshold, and her face was the face of a stranger, and her voice was strange when she spoke:

"Though yo've followed me back, my broadly lad, yo'll find as yo've met yo'r master! Take yo'r foot in yo'r hand, an' yon bundle on yo'r back, an' follow th' road yo'd choose. Hie to yon man at th' Market, or take yo'seln off to Braby!" A furious scarlet banded her brow, and her accent seemed coarse and low.

"I bain't goin' to leave you, mother!" he said, though his knees were shaking under him. . . .

In the furious scarlet of her face her eyes gleamed pale as glass. . . .

"We'll see about that, my soger!" she scoffed.

"I've said as I won't," declared Stephen. "Whatever 'ud you an' the baby do, wi' no man-body about the place?"

"Proper we'll do," said Malvina, nodding her head at him sternly. "Pick up yon bundle and take yo'rself off, or yo'll feel th' weight o' my hand."

"I wanna'!" said Stephen stubbornly, though his heart was turned to water. She swooped on him, seized him by the scruff and ran him down the brick-laid walk. She lifted him up with one powerful hand as one lifts a kitten or a puppy and dropped him down on the rutted ground outside the garden gate.

"Pack!" . . . she said, with a scowling look, as she heaved the bundle after. . . . "This be no home for a lad

as looks to make his way in th' world. . . . Theer'll niver be wanting folks to say as your mother be a wicked woman!"

"Then they'll be liars!" Stephen roared, choking and tingling with rage.

"They'll m'appen say it th' more for that," said Malvina, towering before him, like the Angel with the flaming sword. "Will yo' go as I ha' bid!"

"No!" said the boy defiantly.

"Then I'll be bound to make yo'!" She stepped outside the gate, and stooped, and picked up a good-sized clod.

"Clod away!" said Stephen, with blazing eyes. "You'll not clod me into going!"

She was a master-hand at the art. The lump sped straight to the mark. Another followed and another still, bursting wherever they hit him. . . . Covered with dust and fragments of mud, and with a graze on his forehead bleeding, Stephen danced as the missiles sped to their mark, but he did not beat a retreat.

"Will yo' go?" snarled Malvina, pausing at her work, all crimson and blowed and dishevelled. She thrust back the hair that fell forwards as she stooped, and her fingers closed on a stone. An angular fragment of quarrystone, blown from the coping of the chimney. . . . Now she rose up and the stone was in her hand, tangled with a lock of her hair. . . .

"Away wi' yo'!" She heaved up the stone, tearing the curl from her temple, as though in the frenzy of her wrath she were numbed to the sense of pain.

"I won't!" yelled Stephen furiously. "God damn me if I'll leave ye!" And at that the stone fell from her powerless hand, with the curl she had torn away.

"Dunnot yo' take His Name i' vain!" she said in a horrified whisper.

"I'll deserve as He damns me if I go," said Stephen, with a heaving breast. "Didn't I gi' you my word before Him as I'd be good to my mother an' the baby? An' how can I reckon to keep it, if I ups an' leaves ye both?"

"I mid ha' remembered yon promise!" she said. "Tak' it back. I'll none hold it bindin'."

"A promise be a promise, I reckons," said her son, looking at her with clear blue eyes.

"But I've been a cruel, bad woman to yo', lad!" . . . She said it in a small weak whisper. All the furious red colour had sunk out of her face, and her eyes were his mother's once more. . . .

"My mother she's nought but a Masterpiece," said Stephen, dirty but radiant, smeary with tears that had turned into mud, and with blood running into his eyes. He picked up the curl from the ground at her feet, and shook off the soil that clung to it. "Look what you done!" he said, showing her the hair, and the ghost of her dimple crept back to her cheek as she answered:

"One less to go grey!"

"They'll never git any the greyer for me!" said Stephen, looking at her lovingly, and the ice melted from Malvina's heart as she opened her arms to her boy.

She had given loyalty all her life, and had got bad faith for her giving. She had grown Herb Honesty in the garden of her soul, and tended it faithfully.

She had suffered the mutable changes of Love, as a woman with a changeless nature, bound by a promise, held by a vow, as though chained to the living rock.

And she had believed herself desolate, as a tree on a reef in the ocean, without a heart to ring true upon hers, or a faith to answer her own. But she had been wrong. . . .

The Lord was good. . . . Ay! better than her deserving. Her own loyalty was mirrored back from the eyes of the traitor's son.

THE END

H

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